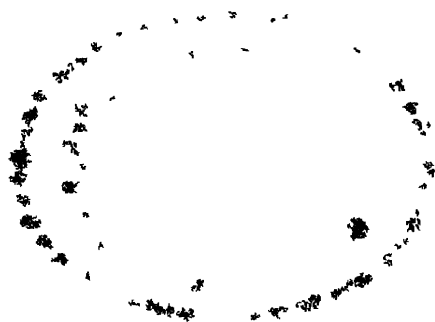


# BEASTS AND MEN





PIERRE GASCAR

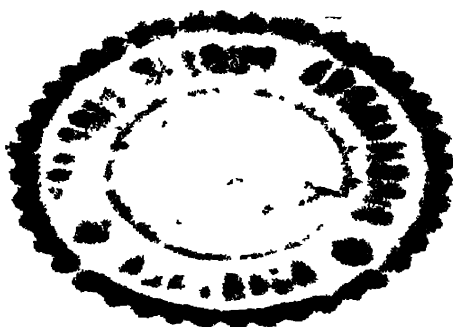
# BEASTS AND MEN

*Translated by* JEAN STEWART



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## *The Horses*

The night was overcast with threatening storm-clouds that had been seen gathering in the East at dusk an hour previously. The foliage that Peer guessed at overhead was still, or stirred only at long intervals as a slow breath rippled over the countryside like a scale, rousing an emotion that was almost detached from earthly reality, akin to the apprehension of music or the quivering excitement of inspiration. The thought that thousands of creatures were at that moment listening to the first whispers of the imminent storm gave an added solemnity to the scene—to the dimly-felt presence of the natural world which, now suddenly sighing, lay submissively awaiting its fate, cruel or beneficent, but still shrouded in darkness.

A gentle landscape, a gathering storm: war had been declared days earlier and, during the last few hours of a life that was yet quite ~~lost~~ <sup>lost</sup> the aspect of peace, human beings, still, with surprise, lingered in a state of simple emotion and of silence, soon—tomorrow, maybe—to be replaced by a passion for facts and an urge to fight.

Peer did not feel alone in the heart of the night; after so many storms that he had made his own, that he had brought crashing down on his lonely tower, he was at last seeing a storm break over the world, a storm towards which the faces of all his fellow-men, and the face of the whole earth, were upturned. Only he could not help thinking that before long this widespread communion of feeling would be aroused by less pure symbols, demanding a less passive response.

He followed the way that had been pointed out to him along a sort of avenue, at the far end of which he could now

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make out streaks of light from the ill-darkened windows of some building and, here and there, a beacon at some indefinite distance, beyond gulfs of darkness on the edge of which the trees seemed to stop short until a fresh sigh set their leaves rustling again all around, like the sound of water over shallows. At last he came to the place where the vault of trees ended, and crossed a road that surprised him by its paleness; no doubt a change had come over the sky. Peer could make out a large hut looming up on his right. He paused.

He knew that, now he had reached the place, he would inevitably have to speak to somebody, introduce himself, go through the usual formalities; and he still could not make up his mind to do so, as though the prospect of these simple actions, which he would be obliged to perform and which, indeed, he was anxious to perform, had scared an unfamiliar self in him. Once he had pushed open this door, once he had spent the necessary quarter of an hour with a man sitting in front of a pile of papers, his fate would move forward under fresh colours, his position would be clear, his future unhindered. He anticipated this with a certain obscure delight; only an instinct of shyness held him back for an instant on the brink. That which was so suddenly to become his past deserved a moment's pause; was he never to enjoy a truce?

So he had gone past the entrance of the hutment, and now he was standing before a vast, darker space on the edge of which the trees began again, forming a pattern he could not guess at. For the last few minutes, as he drew nearer to this plantation, he had been aware of a strange sound which presently swelled, became recognizable and made him halt in astonishment. It was as though a moving, murmuring sea were stretched out before him. Deep breaths, rustling noises, sobbing neighs mingled with the clatter of chains, while the sound of hoofs rapidly pawing the summer-baked earth in

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many places allowed him to identify the smell that hung under the trees in the heavy, slow-moving air.

The gusts of wind which had just begun to grow more frequent and made a sigh run through the black foliage kept stirring up this vague mass, this sea of animal life which otherwise might have settled down, if not into stillness, at least into a reassuringly peaceful rhythm. And then fresh and more violent sounds arose, sounds of huge invisible bodies in collision, the creaking of countless chains like cables in a storm-swept harbour; desperate neighings rang out, and the smell, for a while, was dissipated and lost. And it seemed then as though some force mightier and more mysterious than the presence of a hundred horses was pent up under the trees, thudding against the trunks and rattling the pebbles in its inexplicable anguish.

The first lightning flash showed Peer a confused mass of gleaming cruppers and horses' heads, in the tense contorted attitude and with that violent backward look over the shoulder by which damned souls in the *Inferno*, as Dante and his guide went, expressed their hopeless curiosity, their bitter longing. A whinny rang out and was answered by one still more suggestive of the nervous excitement of the race-course or the kindred ecstasy of sexual pleasure. The wind which had now risen to a full gale was tossing the leaves, and its slow unbroken roar sounded above the horses' inferno like the suppressed fury of fire or ocean—the atmosphere of damnation. Bluish-white flashes lit up a mob of bare-backed horses. The thunder rumbled in the sky, accompanying the clamour for a moment, and in the far distance some horses wailed. Drops of rain started falling. In the direction from which the storm was coming, Peer could hear the sound of galloping hoofs and men's shouts.

Then he turned, ran back to the hut, and went in. The light dazzled him, and the silence into which he suddenly

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stepped brought him sharply back to reality. A soldier was sitting at a table. He looked questioningly at Peer: 'Hullo? . . . B2? The N.C.O.'s next door. You're just in time to dodge the rain.'


It was pouring down now, pattering against the thin roof. Peer imagined the panic it must be arousing among the animals; then he remembered those cart-horses that are left standing in the rain fully harnessed, like shiny statues with drooping heads. Now he was standing in front of two N.C.O.'s bent over a pile of papers.

'Your form . . . You're two days late . . .' said the one who had taken the green paper from Peer's hand, without giving him a glance.

He had seized his pen. Peer tried to explain things, out of pure courtesy, seeing that no account was being taken of the fact that he had set about going to war with the calm deliberation appropriate to big business undertakings.

'Besides,' he added, 'there's been some mistake.'

The man stopped writing to look at him for a moment and then went back to his task.

'Yes,' Peer said, 'I shouldn't be attached to this  (He had done his compulsory service driving lorries.)'

The man was quite aware of this; he kept nodding his head as he wrote. Peer tried to explain how the mistake had arisen, but his speech was constantly interrupted by the sharp ringing of the telephone bell, which kept the N.C.O. dashing to lift the receiver that hung on the wall. Almost invariably, with his fingers curled round the mouthpiece, his eyes intently staring, he would answer with eager delight as though he had been waiting all his life for this conversation.

'I'll put you through to the captain's office,' he would shout. Then he would fiddle about with various plugs and come back to his seat, sucking his teeth with a satisfied air. And in the distance, through the noise of the rain, a deep voice

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could be heard speaking, pausing repeatedly and then speaking again even deeper. No! Peer could not understand why they insisted on attaching him to units in which he could be of no use.

At these words the N.C.O. made a slight gesture expressive of indifference mingled with irritation. 'There are certain phrases that a soldier must never use: a private must observe traditional humility—his value is laid down for him and he must not form his own opinion of it, for this would upset the rules of the game. At this level—at your level, Peer—the spirit of discipline and the spirit of sacrifice are maintained by an unvarying feeling of unworthiness or, better still, by a complete absence of feeling.' The N.C.O. did not say all this. He said: 'We'll see about this later.' Somebody would be written to, somewhere; meanwhile, he'd be attached to the eighth section. Sensing the irrevocability of this assignment, Peer tried to protest. Couldn't they take into account his false position and give him a place where he would still retain his 'temporary' quality?

The other N.C.O., hitherto silent, lifted his head and asked angrily, 'Have you nearly finished?'

'Well, good Lord, I've a right . . .' went on Peer.

'A right? a right? to what?' shouted the man, getting out of his chair. Peer realized that it was a physical relief to him to stand up and let himself go in anger.

'Individual rights are finished with now. Haven't you grasped that yet?'

And Peer was obliged to answer and could only find clumsy words. The other N.C.O. had thrust aside his papers and was staring malevolently at Peer, expressing approval of his colleague's words. Suddenly a door in the wall that Peer had not noticed opened, and there stood the captain. He stopped and looked at Peer, who happened to be speaking.

'Go on, shout,' he said softly. 'Shout louder still! You're so

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very important. You're the only one that matters, aren't you? And we'd forgotten you.' His gaze hardened. 'Listen,' he went on in the same quiet voice, 'I've got eight hundred head of horses here or more. . . . I've got . . . but what's the use? Punish this man,' he said, turning to the N.C.O. 'Look! I'm short of fodder, short of equipment, short of men, and here's this fellow asserting his rights and shouting . . . shouting,' he repeated mechanically.

And then, through the rustling noise of the rain, Peer heard the clatter of galloping hoofs and the broken shouts of men running. The officer dashed to the door with a curse; he left it open behind him, letting in a great gust of cool air, and the light from the room shone on to a screen of darkness scored with slanting lines of rain. Peer, the two N.C.O.'s and the orderly stood on the threshold. A horse galloped past quite close, and rushed out of the patch of light cast on the ground by the office lamps.

'How many of them are there?' shouted an N.C.O. to a man who had been running after the beast but had given it up and was slowing down, raising his arms with a helpless gesture.

He didn't know; a whole ropeful, fifteen or twenty maybe. Farther off, the shouts that rang out dismally here and there in the vast darkness and the sporadic scurry of hoofs suggested that the horses were being driven round in a circle: a desperate merry-go-round. A sound of trotting came towards them: 'There's one coming back.' The four men with one accord ran to line up in the rain and vanished from sight. Peer did not stir. He heard them, at some distance away, scaring the creature and driving it involuntarily in his direction. A few seconds later he saw a horse, its head hanging, come up towards the light; it stared at Peer, who stood motionless. 'Off you go,' Peer thought, and clicked his tongue. 'Escape!'

Just then one of the four men ran up towards the horse. It tossed its glistening head and dashed off into the night.



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'Couldn't you have caught it?' cried the man angrily. 'It still had its halter on.'

Peer did not answer. He went off in the rain; that evening, it seemed to him, he was not to enjoy friendly relations with men, although he knew now that he would die unless this favour was granted him. It would be better to put off till next day any contact with his fellow-creatures, who had come into his hitherto lonely life in the shape, unfortunately, of fighting men. He walked along parallel to the horses' enclosure, hoping to find the men's living-quarters in that direction.

The agitation set up by the animals' flight, the shouts and sounds of galloping that could still be heard in the distance, had increased the hubbub in the paddock. Peer was walking alongside an abyss that was loud with neighs. The night was so dark that he could no longer make out the trees as he passed by. After walking for what seemed to him a long time he found he must make a further detour to avoid colliding with some tethered horses that blocked his way. He felt he ought to go back to the office, find out where he was to sleep and ask for a lamp, but remembering the scene he had just had with the officer and the latter's hostile attitude, he gave up this idea.

He walked on cautiously, stretching out his arms occasionally to ward off the obstacles which he imagined confronting him in the darkness. The sodden earth sank under his feet. Suddenly he realized that he could no longer hear the noise of the horses which had been guiding him. Soon he was treading on ploughed land that seemed to stretch out to infinity under the hissing rain. Deeply depressed, he turned round and hurried back towards the living presence of the horses. He thought he would be unable to find them again, and then he discovered that he was almost in the midst of them. At one time he touched a wet crupper in the darkness as he wandered aimlessly by.

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Later on, much later, when he was leaning against a tree soaked to the skin, he caught sight of the gleam through an opening door. He hurried up and discovered a stable with men inside.

'Can I sleep here?' he asked, noticing a heap of straw in the doorway.

'Surely.'

They started asking him questions, but he could not understand what they were saying and lay down without answering. They thought he must be drunk.

Next morning Peer joined the eighth section. He had woken up shivering in his wet clothes, in the midst of a mob of horses that were being taken off to drink. Directed by the soldier in charge of them, he had located his unit and settled down in a corner of one of the three big rooms of which its quarters consisted, after speaking to a corporal who had merely asked his name for the roll. Straw was strewn on the floor along each wall, and some men still lay sleeping there, sullen-faced in the grey morning light, with their tunics buttoned at the waist and rumpled up under their arms so that they looked puffed out, like corpses.

Others, squatting Eastern fashion, were eating in almost complete silence, staring in front of them as they munched their hard bread as though weighed down by their animal function and, perhaps, by some secret despair. From their speech, which he could hardly understand, Peer recognized Southerners (who are reputed to be brutal) and, after an exchange of greetings, he deliberately moved away from them. Through the windows, on which intermittent rain sprayed a few drops of bluish translucency, he could see the horses pass, led by the men—each in a different way, with an individual attitude, forming an unfamiliar picture as though in the neutral morning light the whole range of equine types was

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filing past in an incoherent procession: as if, in some timeless sphere, the vast and prolific imagination of some supernatural horse-trainer were bodying forth countless shapes, now with concentrated violence, now with careless freedom.

One horse seemed like a figure from ancient art, with its head thrown back and its mouth tugging at the bit, while its leader, with feet close together, arched back and uplifted arms, reared his head in the same attitude of silent pride; then came a horse from the plains, its mane flowing over its low-arched neck, led by a slow-moving man chained to the bridle; an upright white mare advanced with perfect smoothness, at the same level as the man, whose profile appeared behind her own so that they seemed to be physically united as in some old myth; a heavy horse walked along, showing all the movements of its muscles under the skin, especially at the shoulder, and ceaselessly tossing its head and ears as if it really found it hard to control all those tiny ripples of flesh; some were trotting in a stilted way, others galloping in a manner that seemed timeless and universal, being the supreme answer to one's need for violence, for escape.

The ~~men~~ had gone up to the window.

'Some more of them have escaped. . . .'

'How many horses are there?' Peer asked.

'Seven or eight hundred.' They could not tell him the exact number; there were horses everywhere; people brought more in every day. Every day some of them died; most of them were short of food, and, frantic with hunger, gnawed the ropes with which, for lack of chains, they were now <sup>41</sup>tened. Some soldiers had had their faces mauled, others had been kicked to death. Peer explained how, the night before, he had got lost in the paddock.

'What paddock?'

They could not make out what place he was speaking of: 'trees, a lot of horses outside in the darkness.' Moreover their

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attention was now focused on an exciting scene taking place in the flat landscape where the horses had been filing past like lost souls. Some men astride their mounts galloped after the fugitives; others on foot, with outstretched arms and mouths distended in a shout, had lined up to form a barrier, darting about so swiftly that, despite the inordinate distances between them, there seemed to be a real fence joining their spread-eagled, fanatically resolute figures; so that the animals turned round abruptly and then, finding themselves confronted by their pursuers, reared their heads with a desperate neigh and let themselves be captured, their eyes staring and blood-flecked. Now, held close by the mounted men, they gradually straggled home, shaking their heads gently in a broken rhythm expressive of grief. Little by little the tumult died down.

‘Where’s the new fellow?’ asked a voice behind Peer, that of an N.C.O. who had just entered the room.

When he had been told of the order that condemned him to stable duties until his conduct should have atoned for the previous night’s misdemeanour, Peer thought it wise to consult the men, who might be able to give him useful advice. They merely exhorted him to use violence, and as they judged him incapable of this they spoke with an indifference that was near contempt.

Peer withdrew and began to work out a line of conduct. He was fond of animals, and horses, whose forms evoked the old tradition of man’s mastery and of great journeys, were particularly dear to his easy-going nature. The shock of war, the sudden absence of certain faces, the unfamiliar surroundings, inclined him to a Franciscan gentleness which was always the inward expression of his troubles, when he brooded over these. And so he imagined a peaceful mastery, a sudden power that would curb beasts and men. But soon, at the back of his mind, there grew a feeling that overruled

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these thoughts—a sense that, despite misleading appearances, despite manifold similarities, the race of animals that lived here was one with which he had no connexion, as though the war had actually brought into being an unfamiliar animal and human kingdom, a state of visible, permanent damnation, the implacable invasion of a set of forms that had hitherto been lying in wait up above. So he left things to fate. He waited till night fell and then went off to the stable to which he had been assigned.

Under the dim yellow lamplight, as far as the eye could see horses were drawn up neck to tail. The confused throng of animals, standing there amidst a haze of irritant dust, was astir with ceaseless movements like the scattered eddies produced by underwater currents. Innumerable varied sounds revealed their unavailing efforts, their frustrated impetus, their curbed frenzy; as if some hydra lay suffering the pangs of childbirth, a head would be reared high from time to time and then swiftly dropped as though struck down. Peer was shown what he had to do. The 'tails of his duties mattered little to him; what he had to do was, primarily and almost solely, to penetrate into that seething mass of animal life, quivering with sudden shocks.

To reach the alley over which muzzles were bent as over a manger, he had to force his way between the cruppers of two reliably placid beasts. That was easy. The hard part only began when one stood between those two rows of excited heads and pawing hoofs, often mingled in the course of a scuffle or a slow mass movement. Clutching a sack of oats under one arm, one had to strike out with a stick carried in the other hand and force those goggle-eyed heads to draw back and let one pass. The grain was scattered haphazard as the open-mouthed sack was jerked about in the struggle. One dared not stop. The horses, wild with excitement at the sight of the spilt oats, closed in behind the man; and these soldiers,

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these violent men, were horribly afraid of some injury to their loins, the seat of supple movement and of all their virile power. In every one of their gestures they betrayed this sense of vulnerability.

As Peer was slipping between two horses that had been pointed out to him, a wave ran through the whole row, pressing the bodies against one another, and he had that sensation of being slowly crushed between two living masses that he had hitherto only experienced in dream. He could still breathe, however; he pressed his fists and elbows against his emaciated sides and leaned heavily forward. The animals happened to move apart and Peer fell down in the alley. Then he took fright, and when a horse jerked its head towards him as he was rising, once on his feet he struck out with all his might. The stick quivered, making his hand ache; he had set the world reeling, and he was suddenly cured of his fright. More than cured. A shrill neigh sounded; the creature had leapt backward, tugging at the rope that fastened the others; more neighs rang out; the whole row wavered; hoofs beat the air, which was thick with dark clouds of dust. Peer had picked up the sack of oats and was dragging it along the ground, dropping it at intervals to let the grain run out. A horse bit the sack as it passed; Peer turned round and hit out, walked on and hit out again. After each step he hit out; he struck fine cart-horses' heads, solemn as sextons' under their hanging forelocks; he struck nostrils still bloodstained from last night's blows; he struck dying horses that stared down between their forelegs, seeming every moment to sink closer to the earth; and he struck creatures full of fire and fury that drew back their lips over sharp square teeth, baring their jaws up to the moist red base of the nostrils so that the sight of the living flesh enhanced the dreadful menace of their expression. Gone, now, were the mild oblong equine faces, full of patience

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and bony good nature, with great round eyes blinking with weariness; instead, here were faces like the four-stroke sketches in old Oriental drawings, the upreared heads, distorted by their own strength, of horses in antique battle-scenes; with great hollow sockets where there is no eye, only a shadow, since darkness is swift-moving like violence or death, and the slit mouth breaking into flower, silently, under the terribly smooth steel of the bit.

Peer struck without aiming now. One last blow. He had reached the end of the row, and his sack had long been empty. A man looked at him in astonishment: 'Well!' Peer sat down. The din went on in other parts of the stable, where the orderlies were engaged in struggles like that from which he had just emerged. Some of the men were deliberately shouting, clamorously hymning their conflict with the animals. They interspersed these strains with comic improvisations or grotesque expressions of anger; they uttered their 'Hoooo!' with the shrillness of a bird's whistle or with dreadful explosive yells. The general impression was quite hellish.

Thenceforward Peer's life consisted of hours like these, spent in the midst of uproar, anger and danger, alternating with periods of sleep and brief moments of leisure made gloomy by the ceaseless rain. The appalling reverses that the troops were suffering at the front brought about a general disorganization which affected even this remote station. The consignments of fodder, already meagre, dwindled still further; news was lacking; the men ran short of food.

Peer, having woken in the late afternoon, stood leaning against a window watching the men come and go through the camp with ever slower steps. It seemed as though a process of universal levelling were taking place, a slow osmosis tending to the total merging of every variety of colour, shape and time. The rainy sky piled up its darkening shades of grey above the sodden earth where countless puddles reflected its

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dubious light; white mists rose from the nearby woods and blurred the foliage; horses and men, bogged ankle-deep and weary of the grey dusk and the confusion, moved forward through the downpour with extreme slowness, as though affected by the immobility of the landscape and dangerously bewitched by its rainy stillness; the rain, falling on roofs, into pools, beating against their garments, was like the onset of tranquillity, the subjection of all rhythms, the advance-guard of silence. . . . 'Peer!' It was time once more.

Ten minutes later, Peer was back among the turmoil and the blows.

Occasionally, if it was still daylight when he went on duty, he was sent to help the burial squad for a little. How many horses died each day? Nobody knew. Groups of men armed with spades, dispersed through the camp, would dig ditches into which the corpses, brought thither in carts, were tipped; dreadfully flaccid, with their forelegs drawn up daintily; and a black fly, like a tireless ghost, would hover for hours above the loose earth that was thrown by spadefuls over the bodies. Peer enjoyed the work because it was not concerned with living creatures full of instincts and passions and unpredictable things. He might have asked to be transferred to it permanently but for the captain's animosity, which still pursued him at a distance. He had to resign himself. When night fell he went back to the stable, the warmth of which, for a few minutes, was welcome after the chilly dankness of dusk outside.

The nights were variously spent, but before the orderlies took up their individual duties there were certain general tasks which they performed together. These involved only familiar, wellnigh foreseeable accidents. Sometimes only the usual restlessness prevailed, sometimes a sudden scuffle would throw one corner of the stable into confusion; at other times some horses would break loose and charge into the mob of



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their fellows. Then the soldiers had to guard all the exits and surround the animal which finally, to dodge their blows, would slip between two others from the rear. In the ensuing chaos it was impossible to try and catch it; one could merely stand and keep watch over it—or them, if there was more than one—with one's whip dangling, motionless as a sentry, the harsh lamplight blinding one's eyes, in utter weariness.

The horses' irritability often spread to the men, who were worn out by the heat and the lack of sleep. Soldiers would exchange blows, without a word, and then dropping their ferocious expression would begin to argue, passing one another flasks of brandy. Peer was left out of it. They were astonished at his savagery towards the animals, or rather at the nature of that savagery. He was no more violent than the rest, but he was violent in a hopeless, utterly silent way that surprised these men whose anger always seemed in some degree the ecstatic expression of their strength.

In order to conceal the terror and dismay that found vent in his assault on the horses, Peer had striven to gain control over his gestures, to give them an appearance of redoubtable calm, and he had soon discovered that while this made his blows more impressive it also increased their effectiveness and accuracy. They were an intellectual's blows, bruising blows struck in cold panic, aimed with clumsy cunning, as though some pernicious strength lay behind his feebleness. Of this he was not aware. He only knew that each of his blows plunged him a little deeper into a hideously grimacing universe where the horses were all ferocity, the men all hate. He was forging his own demons. Whip in hand, he seemed to be lashing his own weary days into a long-repressed gallop, towards a charge which he knew beforehand would be their last.

One day when pandemonium reigned among the horses, finding himself driven back against a wall by a frenzied

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animal rearing and bucking in wild terror, he seized a huge stake and hurled it at the beast's head. It neighed and dashed off, shaking its head; he had pierced its eye. An N.C.O. killed the horse and the stable orderlies carved it into great chunks of meat. Peer ate none of it, but this fastidiousness, far from winning him their esteem again, only confirmed their opinion of him as a weakling.

But he no longer noticed the growing contempt in which his companions held him. The war had begun catastrophically and the officers of the station, deprived of orders, of cadres, and of manpower, could no longer hope to maintain a service which, moreover, the lack of equipment and supplies rendered increasingly difficult. The litter rotted, the atmosphere in the stables grew asphyxiating, the beasts died by dozens. The men sprawled in the straw, drinking the spirits that three riders on specially pampered mounts had gone forty miles to fetch. In the general slackening of discipline Peer was no longer obliged to live in the midst of his companions.

Meanwhile, however, the rain was still falling and the cold winds of sudden autumn drove him from the draughty room in which he might have lingered at leisure. Besides, did not some hidden force impel him to cling to those difficult duties which nobody demanded of him?

He soon found a home in a shed used for storing straw adjoining the stable, whence the now welcome warmth of the animals reached him. He had become less sensitive to noise, and in the midst of the unending uproar he was liable to fall into a long sleep, troubled with trying dreams which lingered like an echo after his wakening, bestowing on the actual world something of the stifling atmosphere and faded light of the unconscious world.

Gradually his health began to deteriorate, owing to the combination of overwork and lonely boredom involved in his confined existence together with undernourishment and,

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above all, the effect of the extreme foulness of the air he breathed. He himself aggravated the moral effect of this physical weakening by personal neglect; cleanliness seemed futile now. His reflection in the mirror confirmed that disgust which his whole body, by countless indirect and indefinable sensations, had already aroused in him. And as though up till now he had been protected by his ordinary outward decency, his normal blood pressure and his moderate slumbers, misfortune struck him. It has its own devious ways. An overlong sleep with a troubled waking, physical fatigue that can reduce one to the level of despair, or a rainy sky foreboding every sort of treachery—and misfortune descends, or unfolds.

Peer's home town was taken by the enemy, after a battle that left it in ruins; in that wan town, under its rags of smoke, where are your loved ones now?

The horses danced under his blows; their terrifying emaciation, since it was not yet that of death, could only mean madness. They were not the same horses at all! Famine and Peer's blows had given them the aspect of stray dogs, of restive skeletons. One or two of them died; then they died two by two in some corners, but the stable was not yet empty—far from it. 'Two by two, my God, two by two!' Peer wondered sometimes, as he lay in the straw tormented by its prickly blades and by his prickly misery.

Meanwhile the officers were planning a reorganization, a general move down to the valley, where there was still grass to be found. Cadres were needed; somebody came to tell Peer he was promoted corporal.

The times were past when even such a routine promotion as this might have meant a tangible improvement in the material conditions of the soldier concerned or, at any rate, release from the more unpleasant aspects of military duty and communal life. Peer stayed on his heap of straw. He heard his companions grumbling as they learnt the news. When they

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were so short of staff in the stables, to go and make one of them a boss! And what a choice!

Peer rose, went up to them, and told them that he would still keep on with his stable duties. Why did he do this? From a sense of solidarity? No; he had long lost all contact with that atmosphere of manly integrity in which such fine words have a meaning. Out of fear? Perhaps, and also because he did not want to emerge from that humble, battered way of life that sheltered his misery like a dark night, with the relaxation and protection which, after all, night provides. Although this life, together with a torpor that was becoming habitual to him, had gradually come to numb his feelings, he could still frame thoughts: 'What were the horses, and why did he beat them?'

Sometimes, when these questions grew urgent, he would get up and stand in front of the nearest animal. Its eyes drew him first of all; this is a deep-seated instinct that recurs both in savage combat and in love. And here? Here, he made a great effort: 'Poor beast, poor beast.' And the eyes were like a calm sea, and the words soon died away in its silence. He could not help thinking that when he struck the horses, when he let loose their frenzy, the world began to take a shape. A horse that neighs, leaps and bucks has its place in some sort of social order; Peer's own misfortunes, his loneliness, the war, that perpetual nightmare, were about to assume a meaning, they were on the verge of it. You lashed out . . . and creatures died at the very moment when these lunatic gestures, this state of damnation were about to reveal the truth about this desolate world. He would come back again, unsatisfied.

'Corporal! . . .' The others had got into the habit of calling him when one of the animals was beyond their control. Not that they acknowledged his superior power, but they enjoyed watching his strange acts of violence. He dared not refuse, and moreover he could not believe that his companions were

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really acting out of malice, since no failure on his part ever justified such an attitude.

Weeks passed, and still the descent into the valley did not take place; it was constantly postponed on account of fresh plans, bad weather or the hope of reinforcements of men and material. By the onset of winter the idea seemed to have been abandoned. It was about this period that Peer started to have dreams.

These dreams followed the recognized pattern so closely that he immediately blamed himself, thinking that he must be affected by the force of suggestion of early memories, of the moral tales of his childhood. But was it really strange that, living continually amongst the horses whose uproar battered his mind even in sleep, like waves, he should be haunted by tossing hoofs, writhing necks, equestrian terrors? Often he was surrounded by countless thronging beasts; he struggled, he fell, he was crushed underfoot. Then sometimes he felt all his sufferings suddenly vanish. He became a rider then, dashing over empty spaces where not even a breath of wind impeded his career or deprived him of the inspiring sensation of airy flight that was terrifying at first and then brought total release.

But soon he was back amidst the scenes of his torment; he was shut up with the animals as in an ark obstinately surviving on the calm extent of waters, and he would wake up moaning, profoundly bewildered. That trot that recurred as a *leit-motiv* through his dreams, that escape into space with which they all ended, might have taught him the reasons for the bitterness which he wreaked upon the animals and allowed him to identify one aspect at least of his misery. But it was too late.

Sometimes he saw spots dancing in the light before his eyes, and he was half aware that he would soon belong to that world towards which he was slowly gravitating, which drew him somewhat as one can fascinate a child and awaken its

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longing by juggling, at a little distance from it, with some fruit that hitherto it has scarcely desired.

He had grown considerably thinner. He sometimes caught his fellows looking at him with that critical curiosity amounting almost to suspicion aroused by those in whom madness lies latent. The stable orderlies watched him with the same cold scrutiny with which they observed the behaviour of a young unbroken animal. Peer had already begun to grow frightened, driven faster towards his doom by that terror inevitably aroused by the grim and earnest faces of psychiatrists and horse-trainers. Suppose one of them were to come up and twist his arm; he would weep with shame and weakness!

And in the stable the trampling grew wilder, as though thousands of furies were chained up there. Despite their enfeebled condition, the animals were in a state of extreme nervous tension. One sharp crack of a whip was enough to make the whole mass catch fire, to set all the manes fluttering. Peer recognized here the familiar incidents of his dreams. Was this dream about to open out, as sometimes happened in the night? To expand into a wide clear sky, the haunt of infinite invisible riders? Was a bright birth about to crown the sombre centuries of gestation?

'Corporal, the straw's mouldy. Corporal, one horse has broken its foot. Corporal, one horse has died. Corporal . . .'

There was one short period during which the men took a delight in harassing him, trying to turn his anger against themselves. They hoped thus to become acquainted with that semi-madness of his that found vent only against the animals or retired into a mute solitude that irritated them.

Peer would lift his hand slowly with a gesture of indifference, as though to exorcise the irreparable, a lingering gesture that sometimes left his hand raised forgetfully in the air. The men grew tired of the game; besides, the sadness of their condition left them little heart for such things. It was winter. All



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life had taken refuge in the stables where, if the air was unbreathable, movement impossible and rest disturbed by rats and vermin, the men could yet find warmth and noise, the one relaxing their bodies, the other dissipating their anxiety. And even this refuge was a precarious one, for they were exposed not only to the discomfort of their surroundings but to hunger and the repeated echo of disastrous news.

The cold snowy weather had slowed down the march of the hostile armies, but the South, where were most of the men's families and homes, had already been overrun. And it was probable that the region where they were stationed would soon be in danger. Nobody knew whether these facts made any impression on Peer.

When people passed by the heap of straw where he was usually lying they were surprised to meet his gaze, wide open in the darkness; at the sight of this stare, their questions died on their lips because they read in it the tremendous answer that every man carries secretly in his heart, postponed no doubt but inevitable. And then, out of a distant sky, came the moment which was to bring to a conclusion all the long-drawn-out torments of this lonely spot.

It was on a winter's day, a little brighter than the previous days. Towards noon the sound of throbbing engines reached them from the west.

They were surprised at first; since the beginning of the war they had barely seen three aircraft pass. Then they grew uneasy. The planes, which they could now make out and which bore enemy markings, were wheeling round in the sky looking for their objective with such an even speed and so smooth a sound that they seemed merely to form part of a sidereal movement.

Then very far off behind the trees explosions shook the soil, without affecting the calm of the sky. At the time, nobody knew what had happened; the column of a company of

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the Army Service Corps loaded with equipment and provisions was blown up five miles away from the camp to which it was bringing relief and—with its fresh troops and modern lorries—the token of the country's first victorious reaction, showing the war in a new and more hopeful light. The aircraft were still wheeling.

'Our turn next,' thought the men, and they did not move, unconsciously preferring the familiar shelter of the walls that for six months had housed their untroubled way of life, their uneventful past, to the open spaces where they would run, carrying their own fate, exposed to their own unpredictable swerves and conflicting instincts and where they would be utterly, nakedly alone.

Fear had begun to grip them, however, and almost simultaneously they all thought of Peer, no doubt because he, with his semi-madness which seemed to them something surpassing reason, belonged to that occult world where in the next ten minutes they were going to die or to live; in short, because he carried a secret, the only thing that could be opposed to that obscure, insistent throbbing up in the sky.

'Corporal!' they shouted, this time in earnest. Peer had gone out. They soon saw him come running back. 'Captain's orders! All the horses to be untied, all the doors to be opened. Quick, quick!'

He seemed calmer and more dignified than usual.

The men carried out the order, which had come from no captain but from a very different power—one which had suffered deeply hitherto. They hacked through the taut ropes to which the horses' bridles were fastened.

There was a moment's hesitation. The men were backing against the walls. Then one of the animals that was standing near the wide-open door moved towards the open air, snorted and neighed. And the stampede began.

The order had been passed to every corner of the camp.



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Columns of horses rushed towards freedom, so close-pressed as they passed through the doors that the heads of some lay on the cruppers of others, tossing jerkily as though they were trying to bite the air, like the little fringed waves that crest the sea.

The drone in the depths of the sky was covered now by the sound of a thousand hoofs; the whole earth was pulsating with the noise. Sometimes a horse that from chance or habit had strayed apart from the rest would begin to prance on the spot as though driven against an invisible shore, would bite at imaginary foliage in the air and then drift back into the stream.

All individuality, all precision of form had vanished; there were no longer any thin horses, lame or blind horses, dying horses; there was only a great rushing stream of equine life, at first seeming lightly furrowed, from a close view, by the myriad folds of skin at groin and neck, but soon becoming wholly smooth and flowing with a noise of subterranean thunder towards the untroubled prospect where storms were past and miracles accomplished.

Not a single horse was ever brought back. Peer was set down as a deserter after a week's absence.

## *The House of Blood*

The back of my aunt's house looked on to a little square, and perhaps that was how it all started. The little square was called the Place d'Armes, or else the Place du Marché aux Oies; opinions differed. In any case, the names referred to a past so remote that nobody knew quite what to believe.

Anyhow, there the square stood, shut in on every side by low houses with decrepit façades, and as I said, that's maybe how it all started.

You can never persuade Fate, as it goes along beside you, to unclench its fist. If you could, you'd probably discover to your surprise that Fate was grasping in its hand the most trivial of relics, the object you had soonest forgotten, the factor that seemed most devoid of importance: the colour of a day, a mottled pebble, a word coiled up on itself like a tiny snake, a tear maybe . . . I was an orphan, about thirteen years old. So perhaps Fate, at that time, may have held in trust for me one of those tears which, for that matter, I let flow pretty freely on the slightest provocation.

The little square, which had long been abandoned by whatever gave it its name, showed on every side only grey walls and closed doors over which creepers climbed, shedding their leaves. If I shut my eyes I always picture the little square on a December afternoon, with one newly-shod horse crossing it; I can't describe it better.

There I was, quite absorbed in the silence, when a sound of doors being pushed back told me that life had returned to the square. The butcher had just opened up the slaughter-house. One should beware of impressive words, particularly of that one, which might easily make one expect to be cut in pieces.

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Actually the slaughter-house was just a shed with a concrete floor, but every evening at the same time it opened its doors on the square, which was like a cosy cul-de-sac with only two alleys leading from it; and then the square became a sort of subterranean boulevard, violently lit up by the electric lamps and, at the same time, by the sudden sight of blood.

The butcher went into the shed carrying a lamb with its feet bound. At about every second step the lamb bleated, its strangely swollen tongue lolling in a lipless, chinless mouth. It kept turning its head to right and left with a stupidly mechanical, terrified movement, staring at either side of the gloomy square with its round, pale, light-fringed eye, which yielded no echo, no response to my own distress.

My butcher, Mourre, was not a stout high-coloured man like so many of his colleagues. Because of his leanness, his great height, his angular face under a cap of the same cloth as his blue-and-white checked waistcoat, he seemed to practise his profession with awe-inspiring efficiency and a sort of cold rancour, whereas other butchers did so involuntarily, just because their cheeks were that colour and they were obviously, every inch of them, cut out for the job.

Next the butcher went into his shed, still carrying the rigid body of the lamb, which looked as if it had been stolen from a stained-glass window. Without dropping his pensive air for a single second he laid it down on a bench—one of those slaughter-house benches made of thick wood greasy with use, with widely straddled legs, that stood facing the door, needing only the addition of heads to produce the effect of boundless complicity. He grasped the lamb's ear as though it were a tuft of grass, lifted it up and slit the creature's throat.

I hadn't time to see him take down his knife, but I didn't need to look up at the rack to know which he had chosen: the lambs' knife, the shortest, with a blade that had once been broad and triangular and had been ground down into a

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somewhat treacherous weapon, too sharply pointed, fitter for elaborate surgery than for straightforward slashing.

The butcher used his knee a good deal to hold the lamb still, *but occasionally his knee would slip and he had to start again. Then he called me to come and hold the hind feet. When the knife was withdrawn the lamb held back its blood for a few seconds and as I stood with my hand on its flank I could feel it quivering inwardly, just as I did when I was holding back my tears, rigid with the hopeless strain of retention, which cast a silent panic over each remaining second of life. At last the blood began to flow smoothly, and under the warm, crinkly fleece the body relaxed. It was like an interminable sigh; the creature was being relieved of its life.*

Meanwhile, without speaking a word the butcher and I still held on to the lamb so as to prevent any last-minute jerk. Who would have thought a butcher's job needed so much patience? From time to time Monsieur Mourre would whistle a tune between his teeth or else look out at the square, saying to me: 'Why, the wind's changed, it's blowing from the North now,' with an unaccustomed gentleness. At last we felt the legs grow limp. This sensation was quite unlike any other; a slow movement of relinquishment creeping up from the feet which had long been motionless, and followed immediately by the envenomed chill of death.

It was during this last phase that the lamb bared its teeth. Its peculiar pale nostrils opened wide, and suddenly, with a sort of painful grin, it became one of that flock of wild creatures with triangular heads that leave their whitened jaw-bones strewn about the woods.

'I've still got a calf in the Ford,' the butcher grumbled. 'I'll never get finished tonight! By and by, you might give me a hand and go and fetch the calf for me . . .'

He began to skin the lamb, pushing in his fist as far as he could between the hide and the flesh with the obstinate force

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of a round-headed snake, or else in the belly, 'where it goes in easiest', like a cat slipping its head under a man's armpit through the opening of his shirt. Then he pulled down the whole skin towards himself and I realized that animals live inside a glove.

'Just think, they want to impose a municipal slaughter-house on us, with opening and closing hours and a rota for the use of a stall, and supervisors! What should I do with my calf this evening? I'd have to wait till tomorrow morning! But tomorrow I'd never be able to do any slaughtering with all the other jobs I've got on hand. No, Olivier, it's out of the question!'

I didn't answer. I was not expected to answer, for the butcher's words were not addressed to me, and my role was merely to imply assent by my humble and industrious presence.

Next the butcher eviscerated the lamb. Warm and glossy, the creature's organs slid over his veined forearm in a controlled stream, the membranes, still iridescent with the sheen of life, showing the blue and green hues of glazed pottery; with the point of his knife he neatly severed the transparent, grease-spangled tissue that connected the liver with the tiny gall-bladder. Flayed to the brow, the lamb's muzzle showed bare teeth over a quivering chin, smooth, cellular and exuding bubbles.

'You seem to take an interest in the job, Olivier,' the butcher said to me. 'Pity you're not three years older. But after all, if your aunt's willing . . . You know, it's not a bad thing to begin young. Look at me, now; I wasn't much older than you are . . .'

He had finished disembowelling the lamb and now he only had to reach in under the bare pink cage of ribs and fetch out a last fragment of entrails, in which all the blood seemed to have accumulated, a purplish lobe: 'The heart,' he said,

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withdrawing his hand, clutching it as though it were a bird. Then, wedging the lamb's carcase open with a short osier rod, he said: 'As you're still there, fetch the calf along.'

The butcher's Ford, one of those high-built trucks left by the American army and converted into a van, had been left standing in the middle of the square. I let down the rear tail-board and climbed on to the dirty floor of the van. The calf, almost a young bullock, stared at me and then turned away its head, to which its budding horns gave an obstinate and tormented look. I was familiar with that bovine 'awkward age', consisting of long periods of stupor interrupted by sudden frenzies, when the horns are just beginning to pierce through the tawny hair like two molars and forming a bony ridge along the forehead, heavy as the incipient burden of a caryatid. I unfastened the halter and without letting go of it I made the calf jump down, and leapt to the ground at the same time myself.

The calf, like all calves in the world which even when almost fullgrown seem hardly to have recovered from their birth, moved forward unsteadily. I tugged it as hard as I could towards the shed where the butcher was waiting for us, decorating the now headless lamb with a frill of white paper under which the last drops of blood were oozing with a scarcely perceptible bubbling sound.

Calves, like sheep and lambs and bullocks, were quite undisturbed by the smell of blood that rose from the great tubs in the shed, where paunches were floating, puffed out like linen drifting in the water in wash-houses . . . None of the animals ever stumbled at that imaginary line separating the world of blood from the rest of the square, the sky and the three elm-trees. The only thing that terrified them for a moment was that blind-alley with its gleaming puddles of water, where steel hooks glinted in the light, that cavern, too brilliantly illuminated, where the decorated lamb hung cease-

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lessly swinging with a big paper collar round its neck under its absent head, which had meanwhile become a bloodstained trophy in the corner.

'Gee up! gee up!' I shouted to the calf, excited by my new-found authority. I knew that the butcher could hear me. And he did hear me, and was smiling delightedly.

When the calf was inside the shed the butcher put a rope round one of its hind legs and hoisted it on to the pulley-block. He felled it with a level, fairly light blow from his pole-axe and pierced its throat. The calf stiffened convulsively; slaving, with glazed eyes, it tried to utter a final low, straining to raise a muzzle already damp from tasting the black waters of death. Blood flowed into the pail. The work grew monotonous; it had become a straightforward decanting operation, and the butcher, leaning one hand on the blood-spattered wall, began once more to stare out of the door at some invisible horizon where his future tasks loomed mountainous, while here and now the gurgling noise from the calf broke through his vision like the mocking trickle of a stream.

'I've been thinking,' the butcher said to me, 'you've still got a few days' holiday left. I'd like to speak to your aunt. You'd be getting your hand in for next year. You'd be well fed, and I'd give you a nice piece of meat on Sundays. . . . What d'you say about it?'

Nothing. I had nothing to say about it.

'You're a quiet one,' the butcher went on. 'Suits me all right. Well then, it's understood; I'll speak to your aunt this evening. You try and prepare her.'

The calf, not completely drained of its blood, was still jerking on the pulley-block. A thread of spittle, golden and slow as honey, was hanging down from its nostrils into the pail.

'Why does this fellow keep on moving like that?' said the butcher, taking hold of its ear. He lifted up the calf's head to let the remainder of the blood run out quietly and all the while

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*he kept on looking at me, smiling, to make me feel at ease in my precocious vocation.*

My aunt accepted. We were having our evening meal. The butcher, refusing a proffered chair, was standing under the tall chimney-piece.

'It's a real worthwhile job, and I'm not saying that just because it happens to be my job. And it's a healthy one, too! He realizes that, you may be sure.'

He jerked his chin to point at me but I didn't lift my head. My paternal grandmother, who lived with us, had stopped eating. She still wore the black coif of the old women of that region, and she spoke only patois. She had often gone hungry, and now that the butcher was speaking in that room she kept moving her lips as she watched him so as to get the full benefit of his presence and commit all his words to memory. It was really too wonderful. Suddenly mistrustful of the puny Parisian that I was, she turned towards me: 'Mind you do what the gentleman tells you,' she said in dialect.

Once again, something that I had brought about by my own talents or obtained by my own merits was being turned against me and, by virtue of those treacherous transmutations of which my family had the secret, had become a duty, was being dictated to me. I clenched my teeth and said nothing. The butcher came and laid his hand on my shoulder:

'It's all right! I can trust him; you just leave us to it.'

He went out and my aunt hurried to accompany him as far as the middle of the square. A few minutes later she came back and sat down at the table. She gazed at me for a long while without speaking; from time to time she filled up my plate, saying: 'Come on, have something to eat!'

My grandmother had stopped smiling and sat nodding her head quietly over her plate; I felt that they were scared of my vocation, as though it were a piece of cut glass.



## THE HOUSE OF BLOOD

*I started work next morning. The butcher had given me a big white apron under which I felt as naked as if I had been wearing a skirt. That morning the butcher was to kill an ox—more precisely, the week's ox, for a single carcase provided the district that we served with enough red meat for the whole week.*

The periodicity of the ox's appearance would in itself have conferred a certain solemnity on the business; in addition, the ox, emerging from the depths of his week, made his entry into the square with the slow rhythmical gait evocative of meadows at evening, horns garlanded with green rushes, and the chariot of the seasons. He went into the shed, still vaguely ruminating, still yoked to harvest and furrows and the dust of the harrow, and it was not until we had fastened him to the ground by passing his halter through a ring set in the cement that suddenly December fell, once and for all, on the little square.

The taut rope brought the ox's muzzle so close to the ground that he was obliged to stretch his neck very far forward in his terrified anxiety to see what was around him, to tug at his lower jaw, with his front legs tensely pushed forward like those of a trestle table, looking exactly like a beast out of the Apocalypse and puffing like a dragon.

The butcher got him with the first blow of his pole-axe, striking with all his might and uttering a loud grunt like a woodcutter. The ox dropped to his knees and then rolled over on his side. Now, the head of the pole-axe consisted of a sort of tube serving as a trepan, which dealt a shattering shock to the brain. After that there was nothing more to do but thrust a small osier wand through the hole in the skull and probe all round the brain to reach the last vestiges of life hidden in adjacent lobes. At every twitch of the wand the ox's legs stiffened, and then it was all over.

At least, so we thought. For up to the very end, until the time came to dismember it, its shudders and jerks were to

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reveal to us how life makes use of manifold retrenchments, glides without respite behind other layers of flesh, runs along the veins, swims up the bloodstream like a shoal of salmon, halts and quivers for a moment in a nerve, then shifts its position once more and, gradually swept away, clings to the rim of the wound where the blood wells out and even lingers there after the last clot has formed, when its retreat is cut off and the cold pink dawn of death breaks within.

Now the blood was flowing like dark paint on which the first dry skin was already wrinkling. As the ox was lying flat on the ground it was not possible to collect the blood in a pail.

'No tasters this morning,' the butcher said. 'Not even Monsieur Azémar.'

He was alluding to four or five people in the village who sometimes came to the slaughter-house to drink a glass of warm blood by way of a cure for pernicious anaemia. This remedy was highly praised, particularly by the butcher; with a sort of pensive approval, people would tell of some pale young girl who'd had recourse to it. The butcher even went so far as to assert that some of his customers—he did not mention their names—drank straight from the wound, since a cold glass had the disadvantage of coagulating the blood too quickly. Actually, it all seemed horribly pagan, and the blood-drinkers used to come to the slaughter-house in secret.

'If you want to take advantage of it . . . You know, it'd do you good,' the butcher said to me.

I stared at him, horrified. I suddenly realized what ordeals my novitiate would involve. Up till then I had stood aside from the rites, and while I remained on the threshold of the slaughter-house the butcher only seemed to be performing quite unmysterious operations. But here I was holding his knife, which he had given me so as to have his hands free,

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standing with my feet in blood, with my thighs bare as a girl's under my long apron, and I was being told: 'Bend down and drink it!'

'No?' asked the butcher once more.

I shook my head wildly and he shrugged his shoulders. He leaned forward and began to show me how to skin an ox without making gashes in its skin, which would then be covered with salt and put away in a corner with other hides, folded like blankets. He worked swiftly and, forgetting my recent apprehensions, I began once more to admire his neat, meticulous workmanship, his ability to force creatures out of their ill-fitting sheaths, extract bones from their matrix of flesh, release imprisoned entrails, and make judicious division of that jumble of parts which, a short while before, had been bequeathed us in the enigmatic shape of an ox.

'Paris wants first-quality veal,' the butcher told me. 'That's why we've no time to waste this morning; the first calf's got to go off tomorrow night. I'll go and fetch it presently. When I get back I'll show you how . . .'

Late in the afternoon he brought back a four- or five-week-old calf, still smeared with traces of its birth. What he had said to me before he left had made me believe that my turn had come to kill, and I immediately thought that he had chosen the youngest animal he could find so as to give me a task suitable to my size. Before the calf had even been taken off the van I had realized that this choice was liable to establish a sort of kinship between the animal and myself, even an incipient complicity. For the first time I became aware of the dangers involved in my new job. Death, no doubt, readily adopts these lowing generations; the first calf you have bled and flayed easily begets a whole line of victims. But beware of touching the creature! of giving it a name! of offering it a leaf to nibble! of letting it slip and break its leg! even of driving the flies off it in summer! Shame lies in wait for you,

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and you would have to run away hiding your blood-chapped hands under your apron. . . .

However, I got the calf to jump off the van and I led it to the shed. The butcher was there before me. As I was pulling the calf towards the block he said to me: 'No, tomorrow; we'll kill it tomorrow.'

Once again he explained that Paris insisted on white veal. In butchers' language, this meant a very young animal which had been kept in the dark for a whole day and fed on water.

'Tie it up in that corner and close the doors,' said the butcher. Presently he brought me a green bottle full of water. 'You must make him drink some of this every hour. Wait and I'll show you.'

He bestrode the calf, slide his forearm under its head, tilted it backwards and, holding the bottle upside down, forced the neck between the animal's jaws. The water overflowed, wetting the butcher's trousers and flooding the nostrils and upturned eyes of the calf, which vainly struggled to escape. However, it had swallowed half the bottle. The butcher relaxed his grasp: 'You see! Nothing magical about it . . .'

I closed the doors and darkness filled the shed, the cement floor of which I had swilled during the afternoon. My boss was waiting for me on the threshold of the little door, up three steps, that led to the shop. In the shed, puddles of water reflected the square of light framed in the narrow doorway.

'Now take your bottle,' he said to me sharply. 'From now on it'll be *your* bottle. Whenever you don't need it, put it in a place nobody else knows, where you'll always be able to find it again. And mind you don't break it!'

I went straight off to fill it at the kitchen tap.

'What are you going to do with that bottle?' the butcher's wife asked me. She was a dark, heavyish little woman in her forties. Wearing a perpetual bandage round her finger, she

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was busy all day serving customers in the shop. I told her it was for the calf.

'You're quite sure?' she asked me, narrowing her eyes in a cruel smile. 'Poor Olivier! You've been looking quite lost all day, and I think you'd swallow anything! One's got to believe in what one's doing, you know! Well, are you going to fill that bottle or aren't you?' she cried, dropping her smile and suddenly growing aggressive.

I stood undecided, and she burst out laughing. Why did she laugh at me? Why had the butcher spoken so sharply to me a few minutes before? This first day was certainly a day of metamorphoses. It began to seem as if I were the victim of some tremendous hoax, and henceforward there was to be one more sheep inside that house of blood, a sort of human sheep, snubbed, cuffed, badgered, alone, like a pariah, alone in the damp dusk, in the middle of that forest of hanged beasts, amongst those hollow trunks over which drops of blood were running like ants, in the peculiar hush of sawdust, where an open kidney filled the air with its smell as though it had been a geranium.

After telling me to fill my bottle and showing me how to clean out the stalls, the butcher's wife had left me alone in the shop. The wire netting was still up over the windows, and sometimes passers-by pressed their faces against it or merely ran their fingers over it. They were so surprised to see me clad as I was that they sometimes remarked: 'Why, it's Olivier!' saying nothing more, doing nothing more, merely going off in the damp dusk brooding over the strangeness of the times they lived in. Occasionally they failed to recognize me, because I had turned away or hidden my head under my bare arm, and thanks to the darkness had contorted myself so as to be one with the shapeless animals hanging from the four corners of the room. When the people had gone away I started cleaning my stalls again. The clock struck the hour.

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Then I pushed open the little door of the shed and, groping along the wall on the left, I switched on the light. The cement floor of the shed was so clean, so gleaming with water that, at the far end of it, the calf with its outspread feet looked like a skater carried away by his own impetus, brought to a dead stop and staring round-eyed, paralysed by the fear of falling. All around the whitewashed walls, shining wanly in the light, inexorably confronted the animal which, poised unsteadily on the treacherous ground, seemed about to dart off afresh, like lightning, on its wild career. I went towards it cautiously, holding my green bottle in my hand.

The calf's flanks, still viscous, did not stir. I took hold of its head, forced open its jaws and inserted the neck of the bottle. Then I felt a sudden cool wetness over my leg; the calf had moved. Helpless, seized with invincible nausea, it vomited the water in great spasms. It did not even try to struggle, but merely met me with that supreme refusal that makes the throat tense and the whole head rigid and hard as a block of stone. The small yellowish electric lamp shone down unblinkingly on this silent struggle. I was soaked. The calf belatedly, limply, moved its foot in one of those very slow movements that sometimes express the extremes of wild despair and fierce suffering; the quiet climax to a burden that has long been intolerable, the moment when agony drops all defences. That calf! Darkness had fallen and the wind was shaking the great doors of the shed; it was like a wind at sea. Now, beyond the reach of death, we had attained that point of perfect irrationality where creatures begin to transcend their element; the calf was becoming a sea-horse.

Closely locked to one another, we had been carried far from the butcher's shop, far from bloodstained houses, far from villages, away from this earth, beyond its shores, into the midst of a sea with foaming billows. Now I could feel the shed pitching and I saw the solitary lamp swinging

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and I clung closer to my thin, water-sated steed: 'Go on, drink!' I shouted to the shuddering calf as I hugged it to my breast.

The bottle was already empty. But the shed was still pitching. The wind rattled the doors; there would be no atonement for this ocean.

No, nothing would ever be atoned for. Here, no reckoning was made of evil and suffering, and there was no reason on earth why the butcher, with his hook fastened to his belt, should ever stop walking along those endless rows where animals—always the same animals—were lined up with their removable heads and the sentence of suffering from which they would never be reprieved. Animals are well aware of it. Some of them, just before the pole-axe falls, shut their white-lashed eyes. No, there is really no reason why it should ever stop. . . .

Days passed. In the evenings I sometimes lingered in the shed where the calf was trying to digest his water. I disliked cleaning out the stalls.

'Olivier! Olivier!' shouted the butcher from the passage. I hurried out.

'Now then, you're idling, my boy! Off with you to the shop!' he ordered, and made as if to box my ears.

I disappeared in terror, stumbling against something in the dark passage. And my bottle—hadn't I forgotten it beside the calf? Mightn't he knock it over any minute and break it? And suppose he cut his foot on a bit of glass? In the shop I saw my aunt, wearing a black knitted shawl over her head. She had come to fetch the piece of sirloin tied up with white string and accompanied by basting bacon, which was the reward of my services, and which, since it was going to sizzle on the spit, well coated with lard, in front of a bright fire, while I shivered in the icy shed, symbolized injustice

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persisting even over the dripping-pan and, at that moment, made my aunt's greed seem like a subtle sort of cannibalism.

'What's that I heard? What has he done?' she cried, alarmed, as she saw the angry expression on the butcher's face.

She had stretched out her hand as though to box my ears: 'I'll see that he tells me about it!'

Anxious to spare his other customers a disagreeable scene, the butcher pushed me into the kitchen. The calves' feet were being scalded there. In the middle of the pail, the calf's head looked like a big stone covered with yellow moss, with its closed eyes like water-caltrops, but underneath, the nostrils and lips and hanging tongue, blanched and swollen by the scalding water, had turned the little animal which, two days ago, had stood quivering at my side in the shed, into just another grotesque mask of a calf's head.

'If you keep on weeping into your bucket, Olivier, you'll make the water cold,' the butcher's wife told me.

I did not answer. I took the calf's feet, one after the other, keeping the head for the last, a melancholy rite that would crown my endless task with the absurd trophy of a severed head decked with parsley. The evening seemed interminable. The slaughter of a single animal resulted in a multiplicity of offal, udders, tails, testicles and tongues, whose apparent edible value did not exceed that of glands or gristle and which were consequently sold half-ashamedly at a reduced price.

One blow from the pole-axe seemed to be the signal for a frantic dispersal that would fill every corner of the butcher's shop, every forgotten bucket, with one or other of these easily perishable, pallid-looking objects, irrevocably nameless.

When he came back from the shop the butcher tried to draw the moral of the recent incident: 'Believe me, Olivier,' he said, coming up behind me, 'if you haven't learnt how to prepare offal you can't say you know your job. And it's not in one of those municipal slaughter-houses, like the one



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they're building now, that you'll learn your job from A to Z. Here you've got the opportunity to take your animal at the start, in its stable, and follow it right up to the moment when the customer carries off his piece of fresh meat sticking to its paper. You've missed out nothing, absolutely nothing. You know what's happened to the smallest piece of skirt of beef or sheep's caul. . . . I'll go further than that: even the useless bits like the eye or the bladder, for instance. Everything has passed through your hands. With your eyes shut or in the middle of the night you could find anything you were asked for, and if somebody said to you: "What's become of that ox?" you could give him a statement of it as detailed as a banker's. Yes, Olivier, believe me, all through your life you've got to be ready to answer that sort of question. Then you'll feel strong. Somebody comes and asks you: "What's become of that calf?" You don't need to worry, you don't even need to raise your eyes or hunt for words. Your conscience is calm. "Oh, the calf? Well, it's gone here, and there, and elsewhere. We've still got enough for half a dozen cutlets. The Hôtel de la Porte took the tripes and this, that and the other thing, and what else d'you want to know? I've just been scalding the head and the feet. How long? Oh, five minutes at most. That surprises you, but just see how easily I scrape them. I've taken the bluntest knife so as not to tear the skin, which is tender. . . ."

Actually my last calf's foot was as full of scratches as a boy's chin after his first shave, but the butcher had not noticed. He was imagining commissions of inquiry, imitating the voices of other characters: 'What's become of that sheep?' he was saying now, between closed teeth. 'The sheep? Well, it's gone . . .' he went on in his own voice. Here, there and everywhere, no doubt? But his courage failed him to continue the game. He was too obsessed by the municipal slaughterhouse which was being built near the river and which was to

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be made compulsory for all the butchers of the town. The slaughtering would be done by municipal employees, it was said. The very notion drove my boss wild.

At last we sat down to supper, which we took amidst the heavy smell rising from the pails of warm water. Then the butcher, feeling good after his meal, told me to run off and gave me a little pat on the head to show that I was forgiven. I crossed the deserted square. My aunt had gone to bed and I unhooked the key by passing my arm through the cat's hole in the door. With my lamp in my hand I went into the blackness of the house, where nothing was waiting for me save, perhaps, an unfamiliar, diffused atmosphere of hostility which, a moment before, as my hand was groping in the cat's hole, had made me fear that something, nameless as yet though not for long, was about to bite me. . . .

When the Christmas holidays were over I did not go back to school. I don't exactly know why, but at the beginning of each new phase of my life I was able to recognize and analyse a conjunction of circumstances so familiar that henceforward my fate caused me no surprise. I had joined the flock of 'them', of sheep running side by side, calves fastened to a pole, oxen walking in arrow formation, and there was nothing for me but to run on in the dark night, with ropes cutting my hands, leaping over dung and blood, amidst a noise of lowing creatures.

Nobody realizes how strong dead animals can be. Each day, at my work, they weighed me down with an ever heavier burden. For one thing, there always came a moment when they must fall or slide down, whether they were already on the ground like the oxen, or on benches like the sheep, or tied to the pulley-block like the calves. Yes, there always came a moment when they were 'brought down'. And that wasn't all; when their ribs were being sawn through, just at the point of the arch, the bundles of flesh fell apart with a final crack of rending bones, so heavily and so irrevocably that one felt a

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whole section of the cliff of life give way beneath one's feet.

'Don't be an idiot, Olivier. You're hacking that skin like a lunatic! Don't be an idiot, Olivier! If you go at it like that you'll burst the bladder and give my meat a bad taste. Take care, Olivier! Blasted little fool!'

And then, all along that weary journey to which I could see no end, I had to listen to the butcher's objurgations. They grew more and more frequent, for the municipal slaughter-house was about to be inaugurated and my master, on the verge of open insurrection, had lost all his self-control. He had just received important orders for 'white veal' from Paris. Every evening when the slaughtering was finished we wrapped each stripped and eviscerated carcase in a regular shroud, and then we placed them in great hampers which we carried to the station with a swaying movement that made the bluish, transparent flesh quiver inside its linen wrappings. It was fine workmanship. Why should the butcher be forced to carry out a task so individual and so rich in secrets in a public place?

'Yes, I wonder why, indeed!' the butcher would repeat every night as he sat down at the big table for supper. He stared at his fist and I uttered not a word. 'No, I'll have nothing to do with it!' he decided at last, for the hundredth time, and began to eat greedily. . . . 'The calves, Olivier,' he muttered a few minutes later, without stopping eating.

I fetched my bottle of water from the sink and went off to the shed. Without quite knowing why, I was praying that the municipal slaughter-house might soon be finished.

It was not finished, actually, until the beginning of spring. It consisted of four whitewashed buildings like barrack-stables. The river flowed at the foot of the surrounding wall and from the very first day the place became known to fishermen. The water that had passed through the slaughter-house

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attracted big white fish that swam along munching in exhausted ecstasy.

During the days that followed the opening, the butcher seemed gloomier and more nervous, but he had stopped talking about the municipal slaughter-house, as though the final proof of obstinacy revealed by the erection and use of sanitary premises had convinced him of the absurdity of prolonging a controversy with so insanely stubborn an authority.

In the morning he got down to work with an enthusiasm that I felt was forced, with the artificial cheerfulness of a man determined to ignore his hostile environment and to show himself wholly absorbed in his professional duties. This distressing attitude led him into tragic blunders, into cruel excesses of joviality.

Anxious to display his peace of mind, he was soon not content with humming out of tune or giving me a dig in the ribs from time to time; he began to talk to the animals. At first this consisted in casually flinging out a nickname; this was dangerous, no doubt, but would quickly have been forgotten by everybody had it not been followed by other words, other crazy fancies.

It was bad enough suddenly to give the name 'Gertrude' to the heifer with the almost pure white coat that we were about to kill, without carrying things so horribly far as to go up to her, stroke her and talk to her out loud, in an ecstatic tone like a drunkard's, about those far-off, obscurely-imagined days—days that had never been—when there was no slaughtering.

Actually, he was not concerned with the animal at all. *He never had been concerned with the animals.* He was concerned only with that superior order of things over which—taking into account all the revisions which it had undergone before our time—he thought it our mission to keep guard. In his piteous confusion the butcher now called everything in question.

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With endless jokes and falsely playful sallies he individualized the victim, gave our deed a name, personified the knife and, christening the pole-axe 'little brother', involved us all in a sort of family party where there was no alternative but to drink deep of the wine of abomination.

His anarchy knew no bounds and he reached the point, one morning, of asking me: 'Well, who shall we start with?' We had three animals to kill, two sheep and a calf. He turned to address his question to the beasts: 'With you, black sheep?' I was appalled.

That day or the next we had a visit from the policeman. He had come to remind the butcher of the new municipal regulations according to which the slaughtering must take place in the buildings erected for that purpose by the town. He did not deny that a man was master in his own house, but he pointed to the gutter. It ran in front of the shed, collecting and carrying towards some distant stream the bloody water that ran between our feet all day long. Therein consisted the offence. He slipped two fingers inside his belt, said something about a final warning, and went off. The butcher was left standing stupefied.

'Shut the doors,' he told me after a minute. 'I've not said my last word.'

I obeyed him, as I had obeyed him for months—for good at first and now for evil—like my animals which, from their birth, had never had an opportunity to formulate questions and whose eyes reflected that primitive glimmer of light behind which lay all the stupor and anguish of the Creation. So I closed the doors on us and on one last sheep which was about to know the bitterest sort of respite, in darkness, in the smell of blood, on the cold cement floor, with blind hunger in its belly. We lit all the lamps and the butcher went down to the cellar. He brought back two picks and a spade:

'We'll dig a sump in this corner,' he said. 'And then a

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trench alongside the door. It'll drain into the sump, where we'll put a bucket. Not a single drop of water shall go into the town gutter. . . . I'll keep my own water, gentlemen!' he shouted, turning towards the door. 'If needs be I'll go and empty my buckets a long way out of the town, and I hope to see your carcasses floating there some day. . . . To work, Olivier!'

The cement was hard under our pickaxes. We had to work most of the night and all next morning. My hands were sore from holding the pick and my arms were worn out.

'I've never given way to anyone,' the butcher proclaimed. 'After all, I'm not like that sheep, to have my future dictated to me. Incidentally, we'll inaugurate our new plant with that fellow. See what a lot of trouble we're taking for you, Zéphirin! I'm an honest fellow, I am. . . . And yet they send the police after me. . . .'

I guessed that he was on the point of tears and I dared not look at him. The reprieved sheep, however, was looking at him, wandering restlessly round its tether and gasping, with little jerks of its lower jaw, in the hectic atmosphere of the shed, where henceforward no bleating would be allowed. The butcher, standing waist-high in the sump, must at length have felt its gaze upon him, for he drew himself up and turned towards the sheep. His face grew stern:

'You don't care a rap, after all, you two!' he cried to us, in relentless tones.

I stooped further over my unfinished trench and my splinters of cement.

'It doesn't worry you two!' the butcher added with a final spurt of aggressiveness, and as we did not answer he sighed sadly.

Above him, the little door into the passage had opened. 'Arsène,' a voice whispered, 'I've thought of something.'

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It was the butcher's wife, holding a bottle of wine in her hand.

'What have you thought of?' asked the butcher, stretching out his hand for the bottle. He was in his shirtsleeves, pale and unkempt, trembling with exhaustion; he was unrecognizable.

'The vet,' said his wife, coming down the steps. 'Perhaps he won't be willing to come and inspect the meat here. He'll have had orders. . . .'

'Jeandet is my friend!' cried the butcher. 'Whatever are you thinking of? Don't you think I've been betrayed enough as it is?' His voice was shaking and again I began to fear the worst. But he quietened down. 'Tell me what the weather's doing,' he asked his wife.

She thought it might be going to snow. But it did not snow, and when our job was finished and I pushed open the doors of the shed, the most perfectly everyday light, quite devoid of magic, shone in on our world in chaos, our fortress and its one pensive sheep.

It was hard to bleed the animals straight. It was hard to prevent the drain in the shed from overflowing. And still harder to prevent the authorities noticing that the doors of the shed would close, in broad daylight, on living animals that were never seen again. The butcher's stratagem was such a failure that the policeman reappeared three days later.

He had enough evidence to disgrace my master, but preferred to wait for him to come to his senses and follow of his own accord the newly-paved way to the municipal slaughter-house. The butcher made no reply.

'I know what you're going to do,' said the policeman. 'You're going to slaughter at night. But remember that we've as many eyes on the square as there are stars in the sky. You're not going to have the last word.'

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Fate is inexorable; we slaughtered by night and henceforward it was always night, starry or starless night, that resounded with the clatter of our clogs, the staggering steps of the animals and their sighs, deeper than we had thought them hitherto. Blood, by night, was smoother and oilier and above all darker, so that one had to stand under a lamp from time to time with the palm of one's hand upturned to the light to recognize with relief the old familiar crimson, just when one was becoming possessed by the idea that a mysterious black transfusion was suddenly prolonging the haemorrhage of the dying ox.

Usually it was soon after midnight that we fetched the animals from one of the nearest farms. We crossed the sleeping village without speaking, pulling the animal by its halter, and we did not put on the light in the shed until the doors had been shut. This silent journey, these precautions wove surreptitious bonds of complicity between the animals and oneself—bonds which the knife would presently have to sever before it reached the throat. Thus day by day the work became somewhat more complicated and more of a mental strain. In the mornings the butcher complained of headaches; and my head was heavy, too, when I went to bed.

And the policeman returned with some sort of ultimatum in his leather wallet. I was not present at the interview. When it was over the butcher came back into the shed. I realized that he was not going to give way.

'Put the knives into the van,' he ordered me.

I gazed at him in stupefaction.

'Yes, all the knives! Don't you understand? Don't you know what a knife looks like? Well, you're soon going to learn! We're being persecuted and we can't afford to enjoy ourselves now. In any case it's high time you began to do some killing. And the pole-axe? Did you think we shouldn't need the pole-axe? Did you want to use your fists



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instead? Wake up, Olivier, for God's sake! Don't drive me crazy!'

I picked up a handful of knives from the rack and threw them on to the floor of the van, then I hurried off to fetch the pole-axe. The butcher had fetched his own special knives, which he kept in a corner; there were three of them, skilfully graduated; they had been ground with care and still bore the bluish protective fringe of the wire-edge. He wrapped them up in a white apron and put them behind him on the seat.

'And the ropes?' he asked me, more in sorrow than in anger, as though despairing of ever making anything of me. I ran back to the shed again. 'The longest, Olivier!' he shouted after me. 'We shan't be working on the pulley-block now, but with trees!'

I brought the ropes, and the van started off. The trees were there almost at once. I had never seen them look like that before; still in their wintry attitude of crucifixion, but with their lower branches drooping wearily, sometimes almost touching the ground, or else—under the high bushy tree-tops—stretching out, at a man's height, like gibbets.

Now, as we passed, they seemed to line up in a sort of unexpected and ominous plantation: hazels fragile but tempting, tough young oaks, dogwood clear-cut and black amidst the tangle of a hedge. They had become as sharply defined as our animals, and like them were appointed victims, doomed to an irrevocable fate. So around both necks and branches hung a purposive noose. I had just begun to realize that we were going to kill the animals against the trees.

We stopped at five or six farms and at each of them the butcher bought a calf or a sheep. Night fell. I had put away my knives for fear the animals should tread on them. Pressed close to one another, the creatures panted and stirred without moaning or muttering, surprised by this nocturnal migration and not understanding to what sort of feast they were being

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driven thus, in serried rows, by two silent, watchful human beings.

There always comes a moment, just before death, when you go off on to a rough track. I understood it then as never before. The Ford lurched over ruts, and suddenly the darkness was more intense. The butcher switched off his engine. We were in the middle of a thicket. The headlights were still shining.

'Come on, get the first one off,' called out the butcher, jumping down.

He went to choose a branch. I let down the tail-board and stretched out my arm; I touched a sheep. Imagine the dark cold loneliness, and suddenly, as though newly-created, the first sheep, with its full fleece, its warmth, its clumsiness on the threshold of the world of sin and sacrifice. . . . I grasped one of its feet, haphazard, to have something to cling to. The headlights were dimmed.

'But the blood,' I cried, 'the blood! Monsieur Mourre, what are we going to do with the blood?'

'Will you stop shouting, you fool? D'you want to bring people from all the houses round about?' hissed the butcher, coming close to me.

The headlights went out completely. I had begun to tremble with my sheep's foot in my hand, my unresisting sheep's foot. Then, I don't know why, all the animals began to wail together.

'Olivier, Olivier, for God's sake!' screamed the butcher.

The wind blew through the trees and the butcher's voice grew fainter. Now it echoed far away under a black vault, mingled with the plaintive lowing, with the voices of all the lambs we had killed. I was running away through the grass.

'Olivier, Olivier!' shouted the butcher again. And I kept on running through the grass.

O God, O God, don't let them kill any more sheep!

## *The Animals*

The six men were brought into the barn. They lay down on the straw and at once began to tell the other prisoners about their endless journey and their sufferings; they were a little drunk with excitement at seeing lights around them, at the strangeness of their surroundings, and at the friendliness of human beings.

But the subdued tone of their voices, and the way their eyebrows twitched as they spoke, betrayed their exhaustion. As speech became more difficult they raised their eyebrows inordinately high, so that their distress, their suffering, took on the aspect of boundless surprise, of a sort of tragic childishness, enhanced by the emaciation of their faces.

They had travelled from the depths of Eastern Prussia with those nomadic herds of prisoners who had been driven along the frozen roads when the advance of the Soviet armies began, in straggling columns, helpless victims with their long arms dangling motionless, their eyes dim with hunger and homesickness. An armed German soldier had escorted them, pushing a bicycle of which one wheel had a broken spoke that grated against the fork at every turn. He had left these six exhausted or wounded men at the barn where the Russian prisoners of Malchin were quartered.

'Ukrainians?' asked one of the Russian prisoners, who had gathered in a ring round the newcomers; one of the latter nodded, and the Russian smiled, closing his eyes with an air of profound satisfaction.

The prisoners who lived in the barn, held by an untiring curiosity from which all compassion seemed to have faded, stared down at the wasted, mobile faces of the six strangers,

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who went on telling the story of their misery in a blurred murmur that sounded increasingly like a child's delirium. The shabby blue garments that had been thrown over the limbs of the worst sufferer were slipping off, but nobody thought of replacing them; all the spectators seemed to be waiting, in patient silence, for the climax of a story devoid of pity and of pathos.

The newcomers finally fell silent too, but they still kept their eyes wide open as though, through the excessive ordeal they had undergone, they had attained a kind of dreamy immortality, or as though they were simply fascinated by the light of the single electric lamp that shone against a beam in the roof, a light as intense as was the silence. Only the strident, quavering sound of a snore issued from time to time from a dark corner, and then the sleeper would roll over and smack his tongue as he swallowed the black wine of sleep. Then silence settled once more, the tense silence of the frozen night outside; nobody thought of breaking it even by a single movement. And then, outside the walls of the barn, there arose two long roars.

They sounded strangely deep, no doubt because of the surrounding silence, but also because in those days of anguish everything seemed to touch rock-bottom. The Russians' faces, hitherto rigid with the strain of waiting, relaxed. The newcomers started, raised themselves on their elbows and met twenty pairs of eyes focused on them, alight with triumphant curiosity. They smiled shyly, and then, lying down again, reverted to their endless brooding over the bleak world they had lived in for months, a world leafless and pitiless, to their contemplation of the harsh reality in which their irreducible misfortune, their stony misery, stood out, black-shadowed, like a pile of pebbles in a moonlit landscape.

But the others would not let them off so easily, to enjoy their peaceful ignorance.

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'Don't stare like that!' cried one of the Russians with a laugh. 'That was just a lion roaring. Oh, of course, you lads from the Dnieper don't even know what a lion is. You couldn't possibly know because anything an inch above your heads seems as high as a mountain to you. Oh no, you don't know what a lion is; but if one of you tries to stick his hand through a crack in the wall, I can promise you he'll find out quick enough! He'll find out in the twinkling of an eye, just as you learn that fire burns! That would be something new for the lads from the Dnieper. . . . Don't snigger away in your corner, old fellow, I'm speaking the truth! They've put a lion to keep guard over us. It's because of the shortage of staff. He'll snap your leg off like a bird's wing. . . . Just listen to him! Now he's beginning again. He's telling us: Go to sleep, you old Russian rascals, or I'll break down your door!'

The lion roared again, angrily, and then stopped. The men were rocking with laughter as they watched the newcomers, who were now looking anxiously at one another. This was a treat indeed, and made up for a lot of past miseries! But the lion tired of roaring, and then there was nothing left for them to laugh at.

'Tell them some more! Tell them some more!' the prisoners whispered to the man who had spoken and who now sat scratching his belly under his grey shirt.

He was at a loss and, seized with a sudden revulsion of feeling, began to abuse the strangers, quietly, with a sort of unemphatic despair. For the first time since they had come, they were conscious of a certain real pity in the atmosphere.

'Oh, you're utter fools, you Dnieper boys! Just look at them, like six fledglings scared of being turned out of their nests! But nobody's going to do anything to you—no such luck, you aren't worth it! Go to sleep, you suckers! The lion belongs to a menagerie; you couldn't see it as you came in. That's all it is—a menagerie!'

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It was, in fact, the menagerie of the 'Króne' circus, which, driven from its usual winter quarters by the Russian offensive on the Niemen, had stopped outside the barn a week before. For the past week, every morning at the same time, the famished prisoners had watched, with curiosity mingled with hatred, the feeding of the three lions, the two bears, the tiger and the hyena.

Every morning about ten o'clock Ernst, the keeper of the menagerie, arrived, carrying quarters of meat wrapped up in circus posters. He cut them up on the ground amidst the half-frozen trickles of urine that had formed under the cages. He took down the wooden shutters on which big red letters were painted and, one by one, behind the bars of the cages, the animals could be seen, driven back by the white winter daylight to crouch against the rear walls. The tips of their muzzles had that dry, earthy look that everything had worn for days and days now, because of the intense cold—the stones, the wooden cages from which the paint was flaking off, the old leather collars round the thick necks of the bears.

The roars and growls only began to swell louder when Ernst held out towards the bars the piece of meat allotted to each of the animals. He postponed the moment of flinging it into the cage so as to excite the beast's desire, to awaken in it the dormant fire which, up till now, had only smouldered in its eyes. The Russians always awaited that moment with great tenseness. From behind the wooden walls of their barn, the doors of which had not yet been opened by the guards, they guessed when it was near.

They had been awake since dawn; they had risen in silence, sat down again, lain down again, with slow movements that betrayed their weary boredom, and ceaselessly passed their grey hands over their faces, each a haggard mask of hunger. Two older prisoners, who had long ago taken refuge in mute craziness, stood close to the door dressed up from head to

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foot, with old cement sacks over their shoulders, strings tied round their waists instead of belts and tarnished spoons dangling from them; they had been ready, since the middle of the night, for a departure which never took place, and they waved frantic signals to say that the door would be opened in a minute. Already, footsteps sounded on the hard earth on the other side of the wooden wall; and a powerful smell began to drift towards them, borne on the wind that rustled faintly in the thin, rime-encrusted plants outside and blew through the cracks between the boards. . . . A chain rattled against the shutter and everybody got up. Then the barn door was flung open by the German and the five menagerie vans came into sight, lined up against the bleak landscape, with the awakened beasts inside them, and that chorus of howls, and that smell like a living breath. . . .

'Come and look!' shouted the man nearest the door next morning to the newcomers who, lying at the far end of the barn, could see nothing. Two or three of them remained prostrate, merely raising their heads so that those who were getting up could place their meagre bundles behind them as pillows.

If you crept up behind Ernst you could hear the beasts panting—the lions particularly—in sharp, fierce gasps, sinister in their compressed strength. The creature would open its mouth as if to roar and then the real roar would come afterwards, like the wave following a first wave that has made ripples on the sand. This roar was amazingly powerful. Ernst would hold out the meat to the animal and then suddenly withdraw it. The sight of the beasts' frustrated desire gave the prisoners a strange feeling of relief.

'Get the hell out!' Ernst shouted, turning round.

He threw the hunk of meat angrily into the cage. It was dark red meat, dried up on the outside, with beads of fat in it or a thick vein like the severed finger of a white glove. The

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Russians, sick with longing, hurried back to the barn, while the keeper shouted abuse after them.

The soup was brought at last, after endless delays and torturing uncertainties. It was so thin that a man had to stir it constantly with a stick while it was being served in order to keep an even mixture of vegetables and water. When the men had swallowed it, a sort of torpor seemed to overwhelm them: a torpor born of unsatisfied hunger, which failed to numb their dreadful consciousness, and which was merely the stillness of despair. The keeper had shut the door of the barn again, and now it was only dimly lit through a few ventilators here and there. And then that endless lapse of hours began again, when one would lie and remember cutting a branch of elder one summer's day beside a stream, scooping out the sugary pith just for the instinctive pleasure of kneading it between one's fingers; the thought of it was like manna, so desperate was one's need for a miracle.

'Oh! just look at that!' somebody suddenly shouted, sitting up.

He pointed to the newcomers. All six of them, lying down or leaning on one elbow, with eyes half-closed, were smoking. They were smoking fat cigars with bands on, smoking with self-conscious deliberation, as though well aware of the bitter irony of the situation. And they were obviously waiting for the others' amazement to burst forth, but waiting as impassively as if they had been wearing blinkers. There were shouts from the far end of the barn and, two seconds later, a dozen men were standing round the smokers.

'Where did you get them? How many have you got?' The newcomers explained that one night they had been through a town that was being bombed. The tobacconist's shop had collapsed a little while before. If they'd been caught of course they'd have been shot. . . . As to the value of their booty, they gave evasive answers and the others did not press them,



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moved by an instinctive discretion whenever the normal conditions and chances of life were temporarily restored. One of the newcomers rummaged in his pocket and fetched out a cigar, which he offered at random; the others put away their stubs and, at the same time, tried to make clear their intentions: they were willing to exchange cigars for food.

'Food!' protested everyone. But, despite the bitter laughter that rang out all round them, the newcomers were fiercely insistent on this point, as though they had come to some solemn decision about it during the night. The others turned away from them sadly. This was the last straw! After the daily torture of the animals' meal, to be so horribly tantalized by tobacco. . . . A cloud of smoke floated amongst the rafters, like a small symbolic heaven in which the thoughts of forty men were united. Food! They heard Ernst putting up the wooden shutters in front of the animals' cages. Then he threw open the door of the barn, and called out from the threshold:

'Somebody lend me a hand!'

Seven or eight men darted forward; only the first was engaged. The others were madly envious of him; they felt that in a single second he had secured a footing in the other camp, where the animals were fed. They had guessed right. The keeper soon got used to giving the Russian various jobs every day. And now it seemed as though the men in the barn had gained access to that world that lay beyond the barrier of wild beasts—a world wasted by war, stripped bare by winter, but still rich in opportunity.

'I've just been up to a farm where we carried a way a dead cow,' the man would say when he got back in the evening. Another day he had been to fetch straw and he described the places, retraced his journey, told them where he'd seen rabbit warrens in a lonely wood, or a clamp of potatoes, well away from any houses. The universe was taking shape once more. And its slow resurrection was accompanied by certain more

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authentic signs; winter seemed to relax its grip, and there was a day's thaw.

The beasts grew more lively and disturbed the stillness of the night. Next day, around the barn, half-melted lumps of ice floated in the dark water of the ditches like transparent jelly-fishes. In the more sheltered places, where the ice still held, it had nevertheless undergone a partial thaw and assumed a thin, milky whiteness, like the wan reflection of the sky on water. This ambiguous pallor added to the gloom of the landscape. And how slow darkness was in coming now!

The men had discovered a place at the bottom of the netting that surrounded their yard, where the barbed wire was slack enough to allow a man to crawl underneath. One evening, two men were chosen by lot to go and steal potatoes in the clamp whose position had been explained by Ernst's assistant. A certain dread crept into the general excitement. When the men went out at last, the beasts were heard growling as they passed the cages; then the long wait began. In the barn, every man tried to beguile his anxiety. The newcomers lit cigars.

'Look out!' the others cried to them, 'you won't get any potatoes unless you give us cigars in exchange.'

They nodded. After an hour's time, the two men came back. They were carrying two huge sacks.

From now on, the adventure was repeated each evening, and its risk was soon forgotten. The men, formerly made helpless by hunger, lost that guilty air that comes from too long a fast; they seemed to have acquired a new dignity and were oblivious of doubt or fear. They would light fires in a corner of the barn and, when the meal was over, would relapse into a satisfied silence, rich with cigar-smoke. But soon as the single light was put out, secret consultation began. The men lay awake in the darkness; they were unused to whispering and spoke in strange hoarse voices, like the

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croak of birds of ill-omen. But they were only discussing their 'trading', that new-found activity that instilled into every moment of the day something of the cold excitement of gambling. Those who did not smoke gradually accumulated stocks of the cigars which the newcomers handed out to the community every evening in exchange for a few pounds of potatoes. In the beginning they had been able to buy, from those whose desire for tobacco was still unsatisfied, whatever the latter had to offer: a pair of boots slightly better than their own, a haversack, or an aluminium mess-tin engraved with the name 'Katusha' and a woman's face in a wreath of daisies. These opportunities for barter were soon exhausted.

After this, everybody's custom was diverted to the Russian who worked for the keeper of the menagerie. His tasks brought him in daily contact with the German population, which itself was almost completely deprived of tobacco in this sixth year of war. But he chose a more direct method and contrived to get round the man with whom he worked. One evening he came back carrying something wrapped up in a circus poster; it was a portion of the meat which Ernst was to have given to the animals next morning. From then onward this new method of barter became established, and not a day passed without the man bringing back a shapeless, blood-stained parcel which he clutched under his arm, like a thief.

With a pleasure they would not admit to themselves, mingled with a certain apprehension, the Russians became aware of a sudden change. As their own hell died down, another hell started up on the other side of the barrier. It was the same hell: a wild frenzy that could never be allayed everywhere at once. The fury of the beasts condemned to hunger burst forth in a concert of growls and moans that left no peace to the inhabitants of the barn. When the howls grew fainter one could hear, by going close to the cages, the wheezing breath of an animal lying prostrate, its head near the wooden

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shutter, pressed against the bars where a streak of cold blue light gleamed in on the dark hell of its hunger.

Elsewhere, they tore the floorboards of the cages with the spasmodic violence of creatures buried alive. Then the storm of wailing and roaring would begin again and the men would make for the threshold of the barn, as though sheltering from a furious thunderstorm. Their fear was growing. Like primitive creatures, they sensed an obscure menace in the very plenitude of their revenge. And although they had deliberately stifled pity and were passively satisfying their thirst for vengeance, they began to realize what torments they might experience when deprived once more of their clandestine stores.

Ernst himself took fright and succeeded, in spite of temptation, in reducing the exchanges and restoring half their ration to his animals. Then he weakened once again. For a handful of cigars, the men in the barn got the bears' bread as well as the meat. The men felt guiltier about this exchange because of the peaceable nature of bears and the symbolic character of bread. But none of them confessed his uneasiness. When the shutters were taken down the grey bear would rise up on his hind legs, spread out his arms like a blind man and flop down heavily, trailing his muzzle on the ground. When his cage was shut up again they could hear him coming and going for a long time in the darkness, howling with hunger and dancing about. After that they instinctively avoided going near his cage.

The cold had come back. They still went out foraging for potatoes and when the men returned from these expeditions they spoke in hoarse, gasping voices that seemed to suggest an acute danger. But it was not until, for the second time during this endless, treacherous winter, the grip of the frost slackened, that danger became imminent; and then nobody had time to realize it. One evening, half an hour after the two

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men had gone out, the snow began to fall in dense flakes, which went on well into the night. The two Russians came back weighed down with whiteness. They knocked their soles against the ground and the sound was deadened by the deep hush of the night lying beyond the open door. They spoke, and their voices seemed far away. Next day the snow went on falling, but less heavily. The men stood at the door of the barn watching, accompanying the silent fall of the snow with the full force of their longing. They were not fully aware why they wished that the snow might never stop, that the whole of nature might be more completely smothered. Perhaps because they were enjoying the strangeness of the sight; perhaps because they took a dizzy delight in watching the sand-glass of eternity pouring in a soft shower over their heads. . . . Where the snow melted, the earth showed rich and dark, like the soil over untouched mining districts, mingled with the colours of humus; wintry nature was wearing a disguise of springtime fertility. Far off, amidst the overwhelming stillness, some crows were moving.

The beasts had fallen silent. Towards ten o'clock that morning their meal, which was now only a sham meal, was delayed because of the arrival of police officers. Footsteps in the snow had led them to the barn, after a peasant had showed them his clamp, ripped open so that several tons of potatoes had been hopelessly frostbitten. The prisoners were shut up in the barn.

'Who's done this?' asked one of the green-uniformed Germans, brandishing a revolver.

The two men who had gone foraging the night before stepped out of the ranks. A sharp cuff sent them staggering towards the wall and they stopped, hanging their heads, with the sideways glance of horses being broken in. They were taken off in the direction of the town. The snow was still falling, soft and wet, and it melted on the wooden cages and

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made the red lettering on the shutters glisten. Soldiers searched the barn. In the newcomers' packs they found a dozen cigars, the last of the hoard. They pocketed them, swearing, and then went out, shutting the door behind them. And outside, the silence once again leaned heavily against the walls of the barn, like an enemy lying in wait. After a moment one of the men went up to peer through a crack in the wall, on the side where the menagerie vans were lined up.

'They're being fed,' he said.

All the men listened to his words with utter calm, as though to a decree of divine justice. So everything was going to begin all over again. . . .

The two potato thieves were shot down by the police late in the afternoon, in a field close by the barn. The men, lying on their straw, irrevocably doomed to watchfulness, heard the crack of a pistol shot, twice repeated. Two reports without resonance, sharp and swift as a pair of slaps. A quarter of an hour later a cart drew up in front of the barn and the two bodies were flung down by the door. The carter came and unlocked it, and went off again. Nobody dared go out.

The corpses lay with their limbs contorted, frozen by death in an attitude of panic or futile self-defence, and every one of the Russians felt his own body grow rigid in the immense stiffness of death. And then the snow came. . . . First it lay in the folds of the dead men's clothing, in the locks of their hair and the sockets of their eyes, with the violent exaggeration of light and dark of an overexposed photograph. Night soon obliterated the heaped snow and the sharp contrasts of whiteness and shadow.

'You'll get nothing to eat for three days,' the soldiers had said as they left the barn.

When the men's stupor had passed off, after the execution, and their first terror had quickly subsided—for any acute

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feeling seemed deadened, as a cry might be, by the atmosphere of perpetual smothering stillness—they remembered these words. By way of punishment the electric current had been cut off in the barn. And in the midst of the dense darkness each man was aware of all the others sitting staring, in ultimate contempt of sleep, with the calm lucidity of despair.

‘They’ll get a double ration . . .’ said, slowly, one of those who never spoke and who even now was perhaps only speaking out of a dream. Nobody had thought of that; were the two corpses destined to the beasts?

Next morning, when the Germans opened the door of the barn, the men rushed out, eager to know whether the beasts’ meal would bring about the thing they had imagined. Nothing could be seen of the bodies underneath the snow, save the curve of their chests, already suggestive of the hollow framework of skeletons. Soon Ernst appeared, laden with chunks of meat. He dared not look at any of them, living or dead. No sooner had he pulled down the shutter of a cage than he flung the piece of meat through the bars. There was just time to hear a brief growl, as if it had been the sound of those huge jaws opening and closing to crush the black meat. The mangy tiger crouched over its food, exuding a warm, powerful sexual smell. The men grew dizzy. One of them bent down and ate a handful of snow.

‘Shall we ask them?’ someone said suddenly, hiding behind the others.

Two German guards were there, a few steps away, watching the scene. The men pushed the most guileless of their number towards them.

‘Tell them we’ll exchange the two bodies for tomorrow’s meat.’

The man advanced, hesitantly, his empty haversack flapping against his legs at every step.

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As he drew near the Germans, a distant rumble was heard. Everyone stood motionless; the animals stopped eating and pricked up their ears.

It was the sound of the Russian guns. The German front had been broken through at last.



## Gaston

He stared intently at the rat which had been let loose on the office floor, but the rat never moved. With its blotchy grey coat, one of its paws puffed up with some tumour, its tail sprouting sparse bristles from every ring like the fur on a caterpillar, it looked rather like a great hairy carrot; it crouched there as all rats do, as soon as dusk has fallen and there is nothing to distinguish them from a lost slipper or a forgotten rag except that long worm lying along the floor, that lean inert cord hanging from the hank of grey wool, that suspicious-looking shoelace that will suddenly, swift as a whipped top, grow tense with terror.

It was the *mus decumanus* of the books, the 'wharf-rat', and its captivity seemed to choke it, for it had the apoplectically short neck of its species and did not take kindly to defeat.

'It may be what we used to call a *vulcain*,' said Joste's colleague. 'Ours are generally not such a definite grey.'

The assistant said this not because he had to, but solely because the examination seemed likely to take some time and he was anxious to revert to that strange esoteric language which, during the past few weeks, had given his work, for all its dreary administrative tasks, the character of a preliminary and difficult initiation. The rat-catchers' terminology, with its *mus vagus*, *mus minutus* and *decumanus*, had recently revealed to Joste's assistants that their hitherto strictly limited power might be extended over a mobile, thickly-populated domain, a frontierless kingdom where fresh species appeared every day, and now the name *mus leucogaster*, unfamiliar and instinct with barbaric grandeur, sounded to them like one of the passwords into that other kingdom.

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Two months previously, when the Public Health Department of the city, by which they were employed, had barely begun to function, they had become enthusiastic students of the natural history of rats, and soon, eager to verify their newly-acquired knowledge, they had started catching their first specimens in the sewers and underground passages of the district under their administration.

'Take care you don't get bitten!' warned Joste.

But this danger did not deter them from their hunting. What could be more thrilling than to practise a perilous profession which, perhaps, dated back to the destruction of Sennacherib's army by rats, or to the sad fate of Archbishop Hatto who, from his tower near Mainz, had watched them spread over the land at dusk like a repulsive growth and, invading the trees, cling like lichen to the very fir-cones?

The men grew so keen, indeed, that Joste was soon obliged to stop them having their specimens stuffed, as it was getting too expensive. After this they had to be satisfied with showing him their most interesting captures, and one of the six employees came almost every evening armed with a poker to open the cage in Joste's office where a newly-captured rat lay with bristling fur.

The man would overturn the cage and take a couple of steps back, but each time the rat, after a tentative scurry, would stop dead. For creatures of this sort feel as if invisible rings had been drawn around them by dread or expectation or fate, rings of which they are the hub or centre; and just then there was a ring as clearly defined and illuminated as if Death had lit a lamp right overhead.

And if that had been all! But Joste, since he had taken up this post, had become aware that a highly-organized universe was, little by little, opening up before him, and that one would never get the better of the breed until one knew exactly on what routes to place one's intercepting forces. Actually it was

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not without a certain secret pleasure that, led at random by his discoveries, he penetrated each day a little further into the maze in pursuit of the creatures. And now, throughout the city, across its open spaces and within its houses, he began to discover the invisible beacons, the transparent walls, the fences bristling with impalpable defences which, unknown to us, mark off the animal kingdom.

Sometimes there seemed to be compartments like those of a vast game of hopscotch, on which one trod unwittingly, or which were set up vertically; sometimes, sinuous tracks overlaid with smells; sometimes, instinctively-known ways deeper than furrows, beaten paths winding in tangled arabesques through the fields of silence, so that the very birds passing overhead seemed to be sailing along some secret channel of wind. Underneath were a multiplicity of tunnels, strongholds of shadow, bridges, and from the tops of certain walls there seemed to hang invisible creeping and trailing plants up which and along which the creatures could climb, grafting anew with every touch of their claws the old ivy of opportunity.

On the edge of this limitless labyrinth only the organized retreats, the lairs with visible outlets, could be located; and even they led deep down into the earth, where within the fortress of surrounding night a calm, watchful eye shone like a lost gem, flickering and gleaming as though it held the life-blood of the darkness.

Joste knew that down there, channels spread out in countless ramifications, interior walls yielded to let *bœties* pass, and what he called 'the dwellings' lay like immensely long hollow tree-trunks in the very heart of the earth, a black forest through which hairy creatures ran instead of sap, their movement—as though in some sudden spring-time of the darkness—making the dead stones creak in the depths of the earth. And he felt clearly that he could only emerge victorious from

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the unequal struggle to which his functions condemned him if he succeeded in piercing again and again, with the sharp point of a relentless intelligence, the dense secret world of the species. That was why he stared so intently at the rat that had been loosed on the office floor.

‘Kill it,’ he said at last to his subordinate. ‘You can go and throw it into the boiler furnace.’

He turned away and went back to his desk in a corner of the room. He had not yet reached it when there came a loud crack as the poker struck the floor, closely followed by a second crack which was accompanied, this time, by a shrill feeble cry, the rodents’ death-cry, which, uttered in a vain paroxysm of fury, sends a small spurt of blood from the nose and bares two unsuspected white incisors. The clerk pushed the rat on to a shovel with his foot. Joste re-read the depressing report.

It was couched in the emphatic style used by municipal officials referring to the affairs of their town: ‘. . . The situation in the girls’ and infants’ schools at 47 rue d’Ortignies would appear to be even more disquieting,’ the document affirmed. ‘The rodents, deserting their underground shelters, have climbed to the third floor and sometimes wander about the playground, disseminating terror amongst the children and alarming the teaching staff, who are justifiably concerned lest one of these rodents may be a carrier for the plague, typhus, typhoid fever, rabies or spirochetosis. When is the Prefecture going to take action?’

‘Will you take effective action, Joste?’ the Departmental Head had shouted down the telephone.

Joste had laid down the receiver with a sigh of impotent despair, and now for the hundredth time he took out of the cupboard his poisons and his traps.

There were about fifty traps. Some of them were the sort that can be bought in shops, but most of them had been

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brought to Joste by obscure inventors anxious to make money from their patents. Joste did not quite know what to think of these trap-inventors. They were for the most part men devoid of genius, concerned only with immediate results and quite unsuited to co-operating in the task of purification which the town had undertaken.

But however remote their legitimate connexion with the business of rat-destroying might be, there could be no question in their case of cruelty or sadism when they invented and put together new traps. It was probably because they liked playing at Fate that they concocted so many ingenious springs and conceived so many snares. No need to look any further for the secret of the trap's glamour; it was the cocked trigger threatening life, the mine laid under time; it was the surprise at the end of a smooth and inevitably drab sequence, the trap-door that sent everything tumbling into death or captivity; the priest's clapper interrupting the choir, bringing back silence and driving every living thing to its knees.

And then what was fascinating about traps was that one handed over one's own will which henceforward, cut off from its roots in time, would live in a state of pure potentiality, would float in a bath of irresponsibility. The animal might or might not come; with three bits of wood one had reconstituted the elements of destiny, and its sticky trail flowed out from the ridiculous little structure, flowed far, much farther than anyone imagined, to catch that blind, porcine thing like a big bug—the rat at birth.

Joste was beginning to make the inventory of his traps when his assistant, Paulet, came back into the office.

'Have you read the order?' Joste asked him, pointing to the sheet of paper laid on his writing-table.

Paulet had read it, but took it up to read again. When he laid it down his brow was furrowed and he felt compelled to walk a few steps up and down the room. Then he came back

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to Joste, whistling between closed teeth. Although he was still frowning, Paulet was clearly much excited by the scale and urgency of the task imposed on them.

'D'you know what we ought to have, Monsieur Joste?' he cried. 'Four or five times as many traps. Why can't they allow us credit? We'd get them put into mass production.'

Joste smiled; he was touched by his subordinate's enthusiasm.

'If I get you right, Paulet, you haven't much faith in the efficacy of poison. But do you realize that's a subversive idea? They've just brought me from the Town Hall a dozen bottles of blue paste. That's the credit you were asking for; isn't it enough for you?'

'No, Monsieur Joste, it isn't,' answered Paulet, smiling too with an air of complicity, 'and if I may say so I think you're not far from agreeing with me. Traps . . .'

'Now then, Paulet! don't try to compromise me,' cried Joste playfully. 'You and your traps! D'you know you're being rather childish? But since you're forcing me to talk about traps, just tell me which of them you like best.'

Paulet rubbed his cheek. 'Well, you're taking me by surprise. We've got twenty kinds at least, and in my opinion each of them has certain advantages. Still, if I'd got to make a choice . . .—he hesitated again—'perhaps I'd say . . .'

'The Pullinger?' suggested Joste, lowering his voice.

'How did you guess?' cried Paulet. 'Oh, but perhaps you've also . . .'

'Of course,' said Joste, laughing. 'I'm not a fool any more than you. The Pullinger is a good trap, an excellent trap, and the only thing that's new about this model is that the fellow's made it of a reasonable size. But you'll agree that the mechanism of it is sheer Pullinger.'

He quickly turned towards the cupboard and took from it the trap in question, which he had left there so as not to

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clutter up the table. He set it up on the floor. The peculiar feature of the Pullinger trap, so-called after its nineteenth-century inventor, was that it re-set itself. It consisted of two swinging boards, the second of which, after the rat had been lured to the far end by the light filtering through a zinc screen, dropped down under the animal's weight and then wound up the machinery again.

'I reckon this Pullinger can hold twenty rats at least,' said Joste, laying his hand on the box. 'Oh, if only we had a hundred of them!'

Paulet nodded thoughtfully. 'In the meantime let's have another look at these,' said Joste, abruptly returning to his table; he wished he had not confided in his subordinate.

'These' were a large number of traps of various sizes and shapes, all based on the conventional pattern of instruments of capture and death. At this moment, laid out side by side on the floor, they looked like a sort of miniature city, the model of a town laid out round ringed cross-roads, which were the circular toothed gins with an upright, lyre-shaped prop in the centre.

Among the many snares standing around in boxes of varying sizes, the Pullinger mouse-trap alone had a dignity that entitled it to the name of 'house', bestowed by Joste on those traps which did not kill their victims and behind whose iron walls, after the horror of the fall and the anguish of captivity, they could find darkness and swift familiarity and the comfort of sleep. Outside lay life's ambushes, winter, hunger with its temptations. Near the ringed crossroads the 'figure 4' death-trap, a lid supported by three small pieces of wood in the shape of a 4, held out its misleading canopy, under which your longing for the bait would drive you like a gust of wind. A little further on was the Mexican death-trap, with its taut, twisted cord that in one second would bring the spiked or toothed lid crashing down. The town, certainly, seems calm,

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but all its parapets and all its walls are jaws. And even those jaws that gape most widely are precisely paired. The walls snap together to some purpose, and when the toothed, mobile arm of the 'crossbow' trap suddenly propels you inside, it's because the buffer at the further end is its exact replica, with just the right distance between its teeth to crush you in a single second like a carding-machine. So the 'houses', stifling though they are, seem merciful places, provided that, when the job is done, they are not opened in front of the dogs.

'We'll start tomorrow morning,' said Joste, fetching from the cupboard the glove he had made himself and which served to test the strength of his traps: a sort of sheath of thick grey cloth, the tip of which, just wide enough to accommodate the first and second fingers, had been reinforced with felt. 'Believe me or not, Paulet, I'm worried about this sudden invasion of rats, I can't say why. It's not so much the risk of an epidemic or the wrath of the powers that be. No, it's something else . . .'

He pushed the tip of his glove against the catch of a snare, which snapped, gripping the finger-stall between its jaws.

'D'you see them at night?' Paulet asked, dropping his voice. 'I do, sometimes, in my dreams. I wake up and I think I can still hear them scratching. Oh, it's nothing worse than that,' he added, blushing. 'I fall asleep again immediately.'

'No, I don't see them,' Joste said; he had forgotten to release his finger and was staring dreamily in front of him. 'Or at least I don't see them very clearly and, do you know, I think that's what's worrying me.'

But his anxiety had disappeared when, next morning, he joined his men at the entry to the sewers. 'Life's simple,' he said to himself. He had had his dinner, talked to his wife for a long time about their friends, their house, their books, gone to sleep beside her, and then, rubbing his unshaven chin, with



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a long-drawn-out yawn, had watched life dawning over the roof-tops, rainy, but not too rainy. He had laughed. He had said: 'I'm going rat-catching. What a job!' And it had all been quite simple. But now everything was beginning again; he ran his eye over his men, counting them.

One of his employees was carrying, with ludicrous care, a cardboard box full of slices of bread spread with blue paste. The others were loaded with canvas bags containing the traps. Two sewer-men, lamp in hand, were acting as guides and had provided boots for each member of the expedition. One went down a steel ladder and, immediately, one was in 'their' kingdom.

At this spot, a narrow parapet ran along the main sewer, lighted at intervals by the funnel of a drainpipe. On the paving-stones of the parapet, rats were moving, rats were living. They could be seen from afar, sometimes motionless, clustering like quiet moss in the patches of light, sometimes gliding swiftly through the puddles of water before melting into the shadow of the walls or plunging into the black stream with a plop that assumed fantastic proportions under the vaulted roof, and carried a noise of drowning on unending ripples to the end of the longest canal. When the band of men drew near they all vanished, leaving the broad trail of their bellies on the mud that covered the bank, and smearing every bit of cement that happened to be dry with straggling smudges.

Once the men had passed they returned to their positions on the bank, a little more agitated perhaps, stuffing more anxiously in their urgent quest for the Great Truffle, that unique deity worshipped by most animals, a dark god of unparalleled persistence. Buried deep in the soil, or rather lying at its very heart, it ceaselessly exudes—through stones, even through snow and frost—its black, ideal odour. Here, where men's footsteps rarely overlaid it, its smell must have

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reigned like some inexhaustible musk and spread all around like the underground dawn of 'their' empire.

'Let's start here,' Joste said, when the band of men had covered a few hundred yards. 'You, Gravaud, put down a piece of poisoned bread every ten steps. As for the traps . . .'

Now he was worried by the old problem; what routes did the rats take? He had studied the question in his books and it had just struck him that the creatures led an existence that was somehow contiguous to the sewer, that they crossed it but did not follow its course, that one was confronted with overflowing tributary streams of rats that were quite liable to flow backwards but were always imprisoned in unalterable channels. It was just as if, far from enjoying complete liberty, each tribe had rights over a particular riverside zone and a particular outlet on the sea, and only ventured into neighbouring territories when all normal retreat was denied it by imminent danger. But how could one discover where these passages lay?

Joste finally decided to begin the day's work on that side of the vault, just where the light from the drainpipes pierced through. After all, what meeting-ground could be more apposite than that ambiguous region where the light from the upper world mingled with the chilly darkness of the sewer, a place particularly apt for the exchange of silent cruelties between men and rats? Paulet, therefore, began to set his traps. He baited them with cheese and fat bacon, using his penknife to cut the slabs of gruyère and hog's fat into little even cubes like those that workmen on a job eat for their morning snack, pensively chewing where they stand. Joste was just about to help him set the Pullinger when shouts arose from the end of the sewer, which the rest of the gang had reached by this time.

One of them tried to run in his heavy boots, but soon had to stop. The rat he was chasing had already bolted between

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Joste's legs. It was an exceptionally large animal. Joste thought he could make out a broad dark patch on its back.

'Did you see him?' cried the sewerman, panting from his chase. 'What d'you think of his size? You know it's an old acquaintance; it's Gaston!'

'Gaston?' asked Joste, puzzled.

'I'll explain,' the man said, drawing near. 'It happened about a fortnight ago. I was in my area, painting a bit of the pipes with coal-tar. I turned round at one point to pick up something or other and what did I see, half a yard from my pail? A rat as big as a rabbit, calmly staring at me. I'd never seen such a monster. Oh, I said to myself, this one's too extraordinary; I'm not going to miss him. What would you have done in my place? I'd got my brush in my hand, a big brush weighing a couple of pounds. I leaned back and whang! I heaved a great blow at the rat with it. I'd put a punch in it, I can tell you! Well, he yowled a bit, he rolled over and then he bolted, with coal-tar all over his back. I meet him from time to time and I always know him by the mark. I've nicknamed him Gaston. But he knows me too, the brute, and he tries to dodge me!'

'Well, we've located him now,' said Paulet. 'He won't get away from us much longer.'

Just then a sound of splashing rose from the black water. Joste and his two companions bent over, breathing the fetid odour.

'It may be him again,' said the sewerman. 'Oh look, I can see him,' he shouted. 'He's swimming in the middle of the stream.'

It was certainly a rat of Gaston's size, to judge by the huge head rising just above the surface of the water, with its two staring, pupilless eyes.

'If you had your lamp we could perhaps make out the mark on its back,' said Joste.

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Neither of his two companions answered. They stood there, leaning over the water and intently watching the laborious, regular progress of the swimming rat.

'Hi, Gaston,' called Paulet softly.

But Gaston went on swimming in his triangle of water, and had already passed into the dark zone, into the cold stream of night.

'Well, we've lost our Gaston once again,' Joste concluded.

But the three men still remained bending over, listening intently to the splashing sounds as they died away; and it was thus that the obsession began.

Actually it was not until the second day of the offensive that they began to talk about Gaston a little too often. They had gone down into the sewers again to release the traps and renew the poison. Joste and Paulet immediately ran towards the Pullinger and carefully opened its door; the trap held only two middle-sized rats, biting one another intermittently and furiously scratching the metal walls. All around stood the death-traps, in some of which the victims had been incompletely killed or at any rate clumsily killed, with one paw pierced in seven or eight places by the ill-adjusted teeth of the apparatus, or a crushed muzzle, or hindquarters mangled and bleeding: a botched job.

'Twenty-seven,' cried the sewer man when he reached the end of the row of traps, and began to throw the dead and wounded into the water.

'Twenty-seven,' he had said, nothing more, but Joste had no difficulty in interpreting this unusual laconism, which clearly expressed his disappointment at not finding Gaston among the captured or killed. However, everybody set to work again without speaking, in that false dawn of the sewers through which flowed, interminably, those tepid and lifeless waters that town-planners call 'used water'—pure water

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being like a sword-blade. Now the traps would have to be moved and re-set in a place that was somewhat more frequented by rats. First, all the traps containing captured rats were fastened to a rope and immersed so as to drown the creatures. Then, leaving the main sewer, the men thrust into the darkness of the narrower channels.

Joste brought up the rear. He knew that his companions, as they walked along under the sweating walls, were thinking about Gaston. For it was quite natural that, in the unequal struggle in which they were engaged, they should attribute a precise personality, a name other than the generic name, to the fugitive mass whose destruction was to be consummated here. After all, it was nothing more than the need to see one's enemy face to face. Paulet had said one day: 'What I dislike most about rats is their anonymity.' No doubt it was by a quite arbitrary choice that Gaston was made to represent the spirit of the species, but is this not always the case? Is it not always the creature that appears least dedicated that becomes the unwitting instrument of exorcism?

The traps were set again and the gang had reached a kind of ford that gave access to a wider gallery where the rest of the poison was to be scattered. The two sewer-men, up to the ankles in water, lit their lamps in case the passage might prove dangerous. The gleam from the acetylene flickered on the shining walls. On the slope which, on the other side of the channel, led into the ford, rats stirred in agitation and scurried off. A bigger animal suddenly emerged from the water behind them.

'Look, Monsieur Joste!' cried the sewer-man, raising his lamp as high as he could. 'That's him, that's our Gaston! Look at his mark!'

And it really was Gaston. He was running slower than the other rats and he was quite recognizable even before one saw the black patch on his back; his way of trotting, his size, the

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shape of his body all distinguished him, but above all, even more marked than the black patch, there was about his whole body the seal of familiarity, the secret stamp of our private herd, the sign of those numbered creatures that dwell in our dreams and return so infallibly to lie down in their own impression.

'Oh, but I do believe Gaston's made a blunder,' cried the man with the lamp delightedly, seeing the rat disappear in one of the galleries. 'If I'm not mistaken, he's just gone down the waste-pipe from the factory, and it's got no outlet. You're done for, my pet! Adrien, pass me your lever, quick!'

His companion handed him the iron bar that was used to open the flood-gates. Grasping his lamp, the sewerman went on into the water till it came up to his knees, and, stooping down, disappeared along the dark channel. Night, water and the sound of water moving closed up again behind him.

'The difficulty,' someone said in a precise voice that echoed strangely and portentously under the vault, 'the difficulty is to hit a swimming rat hard enough. The water deadens the blow beneath him, and besides, only a small part of him shows above water. Just the muzzle and that's all. Once I tried to catch a water-snake that way. It was in summer . . .'

Paulet had groped his way to Joste's side. Overhead, dusk must have fallen, and since the sewerman had turned out his lamp for the sake of economy, it was impossible to distinguish anyone three yards off.

'Monsieur Joste, shall we have to make a report setting out the first results of the operation? I didn't think of asking you earlier. Perhaps just in statistical form?'

'I don't think it's necessary,' Joste answered in a low voice. 'Between you and me, twenty-seven isn't much of a success. If we publish these figures we'll risk being disgraced. . . .'

'Disgraced?' murmured Paulet. 'Disgraced? But, Monsieur Joste, I don't understand how we could be disgraced on ac-

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count of those rats. I've got my professional pride, but really I can't conceive how we could be disgraced on account of those rats! I don't think I can accept that,' he added, dropping his voice. 'There's no question of rivalry. We're far superior to them in any case. What sort of competition can there be? They're nothing, in any case.'

'All right,' said Joste, 'but what about Gaston, for instance? Aren't we both standing here with our feet in the water, I who am head-clerk and you my assistant, frozen and filthy, trying to capture a wretched rat? Your arguments are all right in themselves, but Gaston represents the first bit of grit in the works, and mark my word, that won't be the end of it.'

Paulet had not time to answer.

'The water's rising,' somebody declared calmly.

The sewerman (it was probably he who had spoken) lit his lamp again. 'It's suddenly grown very dark. Perhaps it's raining. Or else it's the tide. It's like this every evening, but usually a little later; the water suddenly rises. It's just as if up above they let loose all the day's waters at once. I never understood it properly. Perhaps it's just like the sea, that's all. But what can Gravaud be doing?'

He stepped down into the water in his turn, and Joste saw that its level had risen; it now reached his thighs.

'Gravaud!' cried the sewerman, stepping forward a few yards into the narrow gallery. 'Hi, Gravaud!'

The echo died away; there was no answer.

'Look, the water's still rising. I'd made a mark two minutes ago and now there's no sign of it,' somebody, said, as the sewerman came back with his lamp.

Joste began to experience a sort of panic. He was the leader of the expedition and, since the situation threatened to become critical, he would no doubt be expected to take decisions. 'Gravaud!' the sewerman went on calling every thirty seconds, with long-drawn-out modulations in his voice like

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those mournful calls of mountain peasants heard far off at evening.

'If he's not back in seven or eight minutes he'll be drowned,' said the man who was making marks, with that calm, impressive gravity which was largely due to the acoustics of the sewer. 'And if we want to get back across the ford ourselves . . .'

'Don't worry, we're going to cross right away,' replied the sewerman. 'As for Gravaud, he'll just have to take refuge on the iron ladder of the factory sump, and wait there till the water falls again, or else climb out by the machines. He'll be all right, let's get going.'

The little band started off again along the narrow parapet, which the water had begun to cover. Joste kept making the sewerman tell him how Gravaud could escape the flood, and he stumbled in some of the deeper puddles. The rats had disappeared, except a few laggards which, half swimming and half running, hurried towards the crevices in the walls. In the main sewer, where the water had not yet reached the bank, just at the place where the traps had been set the day before, a big solitary rat was sitting; it took flight when the men came near. They could not help giving a shout; the rat was Gaston.

The disappearance of the sewerman Gravaud worried Joste considerably, and as soon as he was up in the open air again he decided to go to the factory to find out if the man had really climbed up the sump. Gravaud had not been seen, but as a matter of form Joste was taken to look under the machines that discharged their water into the sewer. Joste bent over the hole in whose depths slumbered a dark star over which spiders were running, part of a subterranean river whose surface no current wrinkled, and whose edges distilled the viscous, rectilinear legacy of a permanently low water-level. And it all stretched out on both sides, still and silent, into the galleries



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that underlay the whole town, carrying in all directions this image of perfect stagnation. No sign of Gravaud.

Joste began to feel deeply worried and, as was his habit in such a case, he hurried back to his office. Indeed, he was tortured by a threefold anguish: the disappearance of Gravaud, the sinister power of Gaston to doom a man to death, and finally, tragically emphasized, the failure of the task with which you had been entrusted. Wasn't that enough to drive you to despair? Joste was mentally composing his letter of resignation when, pushing open the door of his office, he discovered Gravaud talking to Paulet.

'Oh, you can boast you've put me in a cold sweat!' cried Joste.

'You needn't have worried about me, Monsieur Joste,' replied the sewerman with a laugh. 'I know my district well, you bet!'

Joste took off his hat and shook it on to the floor; then he realized for the first time that it was raining outside. Suddenly he hated this man.

'To tell you the truth,' went on the sewerman, holding up his forefinger in front of his nose, 'although I do know the district I made a mistake. You know, when I went off down that passage I thought it was the outlet for the factory. Well, it wasn't. It was a branch of the small main sewer of the Minimes district. And that's a bit stiff! But what could I do? I went forward and found the water rising. There was no question of going back; the way in was too narrow, so I just went on and found myself in Minimes. And please note, Monsieur Joste, it was all on account of your Gaston.'

'For one thing it's not *my* Gaston,' said Joste, losing patience, 'and for another this joke's gone on long enough. You've got out, and so everything's all right. Thank you . . .'

He had taken off his coat and was sitting down at his work-table. 'Monsieur Joste,' the man began in a more subdued

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voice, *'I don't want to bother you, but there's one thing I must tell you. I think there are two of them.'*

Joste, who was pretending to be absorbed in the papers strewn over the table, raised his head: 'Who are you talking about?' he asked with deliberate coldness.

'Gaston, of course,' cried the sewerman, taking one step towards him. He was reeling slightly; behind him, Paulet signalled to Joste: 'Drunk.' 'I followed him with your consent, you remember. He was running straight ahead, at a smooth pace, and at one moment I could almost touch him. There was no chance of killing him; we were going ahead one in front of the other and it was as hard going as if we were walking through long grass, and that was all. Yes, that was all I could possibly do. Couldn't stop, couldn't raise my arm or try to hit him. We were going ahead one in front of the other almost near enough to touch each other, and that was all. I got the impression it might have gone on a very, very long time, but just at a place where another channel opened, there was an eddy, a sort of eddy . . .'

'Well, and after the eddy? Hurry up!' cried Joste.

'After that eddy, Monsieur Joste?' the man went on. 'Well, there were two of them. Yes, there really were: two Gastons, one as big as the other, and they each had a mark, and they were swimming along side by side and I was following; quite a little family party we were. And this went on for quite a while, till we were in the Minimes, and then suddenly . . .'

'And then suddenly you met a third Gaston, eh?' Joste broke in angrily, signing to Paulet to get the man out of the room.

'You don't know how right you are!' cried the sewerman, who had seen Joste's gesture and dodged to one side. 'There was a third. I'd swear it was a third Gaston if I could have seen his black patch, but it was too dark. But I could guess from his size, and that calmness of his, that cheek! Make what you

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*can of it. I got wet right up to my chest trying to follow them a bit further. I'd done my duty. Of course if you're not interested . . .'*

'No, I can't say I'm much interested,' said Joste. 'Thank you though, Gravaud. You can go home now.'

The sewerman shook his head disgustedly, shrugged his shoulders and left the room. Paulet closed the door. 'There's a new report from the Council,' he said gently, anxious, apparently, not to return to the painful subject with which they had just been dealing. 'I've put it on your table. Yes, there on the right. You'll see the tone of it. . . .'

He started as though to go back to his desk and then turned round again, unable to contain himself: 'Between ourselves, Monsieur Joste (maybe you'll think I'm being indiscreet), have you got any sort of quarrel with the Town Council? Some political rivalry maybe, or something of that sort?'

'Whatever makes you think that, Paulet?' asked Joste, frowning, and raising his eyes from the report. 'The tone of the note is a bit sharp, I admit, but that's just a question of style. Apart from that I don't at all get the impression that we're being persecuted. We might perhaps remember that the municipal elections are coming on. It's obviously not desirable that a whole district of electors should be invaded by rats at this juncture. For, you see, nobody thinks of these cursed little animals as part of an individual's bad luck, like a rotten dwelling or the vermin which may cling to one's skin. No, our civilization makes no allowances for rats. You see, it assumes it has passed beyond that stage. Is it right or wrong? I couldn't say; I'm neither a historian nor a sociologist. All I know is that people are convinced that the Government is answerable for all rats, for all rats without exception. . . .'

'For all rats . . .' echoed Paulet, nodding his head.

Joste read his thoughts: 'Yes, even for Gaston,' he went on angrily. 'In that connexion I'd like to make clear that this is the

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last time I shall speak of him. We're all a bit on edge and it's understandable that we should give way to superstitions of that sort. But it's our duty to react against them. You saw yourself, a few minutes ago, when the sewerman Gravaud was in here, what crazy fancies they're liable to suggest. Oh yes, I know he'd been having a drink after his ducking, that's not the point; drunken men often say things we all feel, and that's why I'm telling you I don't want to hear that ridiculous name Gaston mentioned here any more. This order needn't apply as strictly to you or to me, obviously. Thank God we've still got our heads screwed on the right way and can allow ourselves jokes and nicknames from time to time, out of office hours. After all, for us, the name Gaston—which was a real inspiration of the sewerman's, I must admit—that absurd name has never been more than a code word, a cursory way of alluding to the thing we're preoccupied about. If we go no further we can quite safely go on using it, but, I repeat, let's be prudent! On no account, on absolutely no account can I allow the staff to become involved in some kind of bogus religion.'

'Please excuse my contradicting you on one point, Monsieur Joste, and in any case I quite agree with you about not allowing these nicknames to be used on duty,' said Paulet. 'But I don't believe there's any question of religion, no, I really don't suppose they envisage anything other than reality. . . . You know they're very simple people. I'm not really defending them, but . . .'

'Then why not say outright that the sewerman Gravaud was only describing what he'd seen?' cried Joste. 'My goodness, can this complaint have affected you too?'

'Oh no, Monsieur Joste, I don't say that! And then Gravaud was tight,' answered Paulet, twisting his hands and staring at them. 'I only believe that it's not all quite as simple and straightforward as you say, that's all. . . .' He raised his head. 'And then there's the report . . .'

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'Yes, let's have a look at that report,' said Joste, 'it'll be better than wasting our time on this sort of argument. . . . Aha, they're still talking about the rue d'Ortignies. Do you know that district?'

'Fairly well,' Paulet answered. 'I lived there for some time when I was first married.'

'Workers' houses, council schools, the gas works, in the middle of some waste ground when you leave the town in the Viermont direction, isn't that it? I've driven through it two or three times. . . . Gutters all over the place, full of stagnating dirty water, streets that are mere clinker paths, yards surrounded by fences made of old railway sleepers, filthy children and, behind the black housefronts and in the open plots, public rubbish dumps. . . .'

'You've observed it very well, Monsieur Joste,' said Paulet with a sort of bitterness which escaped Joste's notice.

'I've not been observing,' went on Joste excitedly. 'I've been summarizing. Of course I couldn't have noticed all I've mentioned as I drove past. It's just a list (very hastily drawn up, of course) of the ideal conditions, if one can use the phrase, or, if you prefer, the characteristics of the haunt of rats. For instance, these "girls' and infants' council schools" must have canteens and therefore first-grade refuse: cabbage stumps, bits of bread and so forth. . . .'

'Bits of bread? Oh no, Monsieur Joste!' cried Paulet.

Joste lifted his head in surprise. His clerk turned away his eyes and blushed a little, regretting the violence of his outburst.

'What makes you say that, Paulet?' asked Joste.

'They're too poor there to throw bread away,' muttered Paulet. 'You can't possibly know what it's like. As regards cleanliness and hygiene, maybe you're right. But that's not the whole story. I don't believe there are any places that can be defined as "the haunt of rats". There's Fate; and over there,

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in that district, they're always the first to be smitten by Fate . . . except when they're the only ones. . . . Believe me, I know what I'm talking about, Monsieur Joste!

'I'm quite willing to believe you, Paulet,' said Joste, as calmly as he could, for his temper had been sorely tried by his assistant's outburst. 'But you must admit that it's difficult for me to take your arguments into account to the extent of using them in my answer to the authors of this note. The gentlemen on the Town Council don't believe in Fate. After all, the answer can wait a bit; anyhow, I want to be able to send in a report of victory in its place. Look here, tomorrow morning we'll go off on our own to the rue d'Ortignies and have a look at that Fate of yours, face to face.'

They had not long to wait before they met it. As soon as you got to the Ortignies district, Fate was there, everywhere, leaning against a wall whose grey colour merged with the grey of its rags; it was now a chalk-faced widow staring at the factories, now a crazed mother feeling her children's croup choke her own throat and uttering only hoarse groans, now a famished prostitute with her hair hanging over her eyes, waiting patiently and insolently for blows. . . . Let Fate make but a single gesture, take a single step, breathe a single sigh, and the rats would be there, you felt sure, as barnyard fowls are there when the grain-basket is shaken. They would appear out of the ground, out of the walls which seemed to have already dissolved into the appropriate colour, into a texture ripe for metamorphosis, ready to break out into the pink mildew of a paw, the crushed-coal gleam of an eye, until all this unused ugliness should be concentrated, here and there, with a finality that would be almost a relief, in the unambiguous shape of a rat.

'The schools . . . take me to the schools at once,' said Joste to his assistant.

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Why had such a state of things been tolerated? thought Joste. Why, for hundreds of years probably, had these districts been allowed to harbour the growth of a cold, insidious fermentation whose effects were now beginning to spread throughout the town?

He would not have recognized as fellow-townsfolk the men and women whom he met, if he had not seen them calling one another, opening their doors mechanically, lingering to gossip on the threshold. With their high cheek-bones, sullen eyes and lank hair they were the Mongol horde of destitution, encamped in the steppe of the rats' land. The rats, kept in resentful domesticity, acted as their couriers and advanced towards the other districts; but what could they do, these wretched vermin, what use were they as firebrands or messengers, being constantly distracted from their task by gluttony? You could hear their sound, underlying the triumphant din of the town, and it was always the same sound—as though a penny were being filed down, the inevitable worn coin that turned up in your bread, in wood, in stone: the rat's own intrinsic value.

'Well, they can do quite a lot,' Joste was now thinking. They were already beginning to distribute their false coinage throughout the town to a dangerous extent, and the day was not so far off when, just as the introduction of new currency can wreck a country's whole economy and transform its life, they would turn the town into a vast mutual stock-exchange of gnawing destruction.

Joste and his companion had reached the school. The schoolmaster came towards them. He was a timid elderly man, short-sighted into the bargain, to judge from his thick-lensed spectacles. They explained the purpose of their visit to him. Behind the windows little girls in black pinafores, sitting side by side, were moving their lips.

'It's usually in the evening,' said the schoolmaster,

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mechanically wiping his glasses and staring at the ground in front of him. 'Yes, it's usually in the evening that they turn up in large numbers. Why in the evening? Well, I've thought about it and come to the conclusion that they must have a physical dread of daylight. You know that rats are subject to cancer due to the sun's rays . . .'

'But we've had no sun for three months,' said Joste, shrugging his shoulders.

'Quite true, quite true,' admitted the schoolmaster humbly. 'Then it must be something else. . . . Perhaps just the absence of noise? . . . Do you know that they are slightly more numerous every evening?' he added, lowering his voice and bending towards his interlocutors as though he were telling them a secret. 'I've stopped counting them, of course, but I'm sure of it because of their ubiquity.'

'Where do they come from?' asked Paulet, extracting a note-book from his pocket so as to take down details.

'From all over the place, now,' replied the schoolmaster, 'from the ground, from the walls, from the gutters, from the houses, and mark my words, I've got the impression that they never return to where they originally came from. During the day they hide—but up here, at our level. All those who come up from below are the newcomers, emigrants, so to speak. That's why their numbers are always increasing. I'll tell you something—it's as though they were being driven up out of the depths.'

'And how do you fight against them?' asked Joste.

'For one thing, I've got my fox-terrier Zephyr. Let me tell you he's killed thirty-two of them already. And then my neighbour Julot, the road-mender, sometimes comes into the yard with his gun for a bit of sport. He's already bagged a round dozen of them, but you know, cartridges are expensive. . . .'

'Tell him the Council will refund the money,' said Joste.



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'Let's be systematic about it. What do your rats look like? How big are they?'

'Well, they're just ordinary big rats, dark grey,' explained the schoolmaster. 'A sort of *vulcain*.'

'Or perhaps a *decumanus*?' suggested Paulet.

'I don't know that sort,' confessed the old man, 'I just call them *vulcains*.'

'Have you ever seen a much larger one, with a black patch on his back?' asked Joste.

Paulet looked at his boss with some surprise.

'Oh, I suppose you mean Gaston?' cried the schoolmaster with a laugh. 'No, I've never seen him. Besides . . .'

'Who's been talking to you about Gaston?' cried Joste angrily. 'Who's told you that legend?'

'Why, I can't remember who,' answered the old man, abashed. 'You hear it talked about everywhere. Maybe it was the other day when I went into the town centre, yes, when I went to Bonn's to buy some coffee. Besides, you didn't let me finish my sentence; I wanted to say that, for my part, I don't believe it.'

'You're quite right,' returned Joste more calmly, 'but the tone of voice in which you say "I don't believe it" shows quite clearly that the legend has spread and that everybody takes sides in this silly business. I know it's to some people's interest to make me appear ridiculous. But they'd better look out! I'll stop them laughing at me. Tomorrow the walls of the town will be covered with posters and those who read them will soon laugh on the other side of their faces. Nobody, not even yourself, although you're so well placed, knows what dangers threaten us. They'll learn it when they read my posters! After that we shall be able to do some useful work and force the whole population to work with us. I shall have the last word, believe me!'

'In the meantime, what must I do?' asked the schoolmaster

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meekly. 'Life's becoming unbearable. They destroy everything. The children are frightened. . . .'

'I'll have some traps sent you,' said Joste curtly, irritated by the old man's words. 'Poison wouldn't be safe with all these children about. Besides, I shall have a trap-model distributed, and in every home they'll have to spend their evenings copying it. I may possibly requisition all the fox-terriers in the town. What d'you think of that, Paulet?'

'You have excellent ideas, Monsieur Joste,' answered Paulet with a smile. 'I rather like to see you getting angry. It restores one's confidence. . . .'

'Does your confidence need restoring so badly?' asked Joste, somewhat moved.

Paulet had not time to answer. Children rushed howling from the class-room. The teacher hurried towards one little, weeping girl: 'It's nothing, only a big rat that has just come out of the floor, they say,' he said, turning towards the two men.

Joste went towards the door, his heart beating. 'Could it be him?' But it was not Gaston, yet. Only a terrified brown rat, trembling pitifully in the light.

Reports poured in. They were sent by innumerable private organizations: family associations, religious groups, societies for the protection of the town's historic treasures, middle-class tenants' leagues which, by their hitherto unsuspected multiplicity, revealed the complex network of vigilance with which wealth surrounds itself. The alarm signals were functioning in perfect unison, even before the danger had reached the boundaries of inherited property, and this did not fail to rouse a premature agitation in the administration's offices. The prefect himself sent for Joste one morning.

'My dear Joste,' he said, 'I have no reproach to make as regards the running of your department. You're doing all that you can, I know, and nobody questions your conscientious-

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ness. On the contrary, it might even be described as excessive, and I may add that very few officials today are likely to incur this criticism. So it's in a wholly friendly spirit that I've sent for you today.

'You know as well as I do that this story of an invading army of rats is setting the whole town in a turmoil. The situation is patently absurd; the slight troubles we've been having with our gutters by no means justify these press campaigns, these alarms and excursions, this panic. No, don't imply that I'm exaggerating; I know some quite sensible people who are already being affected by this collective anxiety. . . . We seem to be witnessing an exhibition of real mass hysteria. To be sure, we might relate this crisis to the peculiar state of mind which international events have fostered in many of our fellow-citizens: anxiety can easily become a habit. But that's a problem for professional psychologists. I'm only a civil servant, a representative of the Government. I'm only expected to take a clear and unbiased view of events and to provide a remedy. So I shall confine myself, in this business, to discovering the immediate "why" of things: my dear Joste, you have been clumsy.'

Joste listened impassively.

'Yes, clumsy,' went on the prefect, walking towards the window. 'Who the deuce obliged you to accompany your assistants into the sewers every morning when they went rat-hunting? I can understand your doing it once, for fun; besides it's a good thing for a superior to be seen in the field. But not every day, for Heaven's sake! In this way you got mixed up in incidents that would have been devoid of significance but for your presence. They were reported to me, but others besides myself heard of them. My dear fellow, the whole town knows that you nearly got drowned and that you spent a whole evening chasing after one of your sewer-men who had disappeared. After that, how can you prevent the population

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of the town from thinking that the situation must be serious for you to take so much trouble about it! And then there was the story of Gaston . . .'

'Monsieur le Préfet, I cannot see why such a silly joke—and such a harmless one, you must admit—should be referred to in this connexion,' said Joste, wriggling in his chair.

'But, my good fellow, once more you can't see it because you are not conscious of the prestige which is inseparable from your position,' cried the prefect, going close up to Joste. 'You're having songs made about you—songs! Tomorrow you may hear the ballad of Gaston being sung under your windows. I shouldn't be at all surprised! And it'll be a mournful ballad, quite rightly, for people are frightened. . . .'

'Frightened of whom?' asked Joste.

'Why, frightened of Gaston!' replied the prefect impatiently. 'Admit that you never thought things would go as far as this when you invented that absurd nickname, for a joke!'

'But it wasn't I who invented it,' cried Joste. 'It was my assistants. It's nothing to do with me.'

'Just as you please,' said the prefect, shrugging his shoulders. 'Anyhow, I'm not making out a case against you, I tell you. I didn't send for you to pick a quarrel. I merely wanted to lay my finger on the true causes of a state of things which is beginning to annoy me seriously. We won't spend any more time on it and we'll look about for a remedy straight away. I mean a psychological remedy; for the rest is a mere administrative question. I've written to the National Laboratory of Public Health and they are going to send us some newly discovered poison of extreme virulence. That being settled, I felt we must tackle the symbol without delay: the day after tomorrow, Gaston must be dead.'

'I'd like nothing better,' said Joste, 'but hitherto we've not succeeded in killing him and we'd have to be exceptionally lucky. . . .'

## GASTON

'Will you be good enough to let me finish explaining my plan?' asked the prefect with a freezing smile. 'The day after tomorrow, Gaston will be dead. Dead in any case, do you get me? You'll spread the rumour, letting only two or three of your assistants into the secret, the most reliable; and if needs be you'll paint black patches on the back of some dead rat or other, so that gossip-mongers can give a description of it. In the meantime we'll let the Press have a reassuring statement. You'll see to that yourself. You might speak, for instance, of six or seven hundred rats being exterminated. That'll give you the opportunity to mention the devastating effects of the new product I was telling you about—it's called anaphtylturea. I'll write it down for you. . . . Of course we'll say that we've already had a large consignment of it. We'll add that the campaign for exterminating the rats is practically over and that the urban authorities are merely performing a mopping-up operation, in the strategic sense of the word, which, thanks to the powerful new methods at their disposal, will be easily accomplished. A week later the Press will publish my congratulations to you. And everything will be quiet and orderly again.'

The prefect banged his desk with the palm of his hand. He stood up, and Joste did likewise; the interview was at an end.

'Joste, my dear fellow, I was obliged to speak somewhat sharply just now. . . . Oh yes,' said the prefect, laying his hand on Joste's shoulder, as the latter was about to protest. 'You are young and no doubt this is the first time you have had to realize that the problems facing senior civil servants like ourselves are always problems of government. You must remember that your duties are extremely important, commonplace though they may seem. They are extremely important because the world itself is on a level with the rats.'

He went back with Joste into the anteroom: 'That's understood then? The day after tomorrow Gaston will be dead.'

He laid his hand on Joste's shoulder once more: 'I must add

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that I should be very glad if Gaston really could be dead that day,' he muttered as though making a confession.

Why had he said that? What demon had suggested those words to him? He had uttered them with wicked tranquillity, as though, just as Joste was going away, he intended to call the whole thing in question, and to imply that their interview might have been a farce, a mere administrative rite which had automatically outlived some ancient belief. His words, essentially, expressed the conviction that nothing would ever change, and yet they were set out in the formula of an old wish, long since deserted by faith and now merely a last verbal defence against despair. Thus, he knew that Gaston would never die. Gaston was to be killed in effigy. It was the birth of a cult.

But already Gaston's name and Gaston's fame had travelled round the town, borne aloft like some processional dragon and arousing cries of anguish ill-concealed by a murmur of suspect delight. During the days preceding the sham execution of Gaston, excitement was carried to its height by a series of events ranging, simultaneously, from the insignificant to the momentous; it might have been amusing to count them, like the stars in some vast constellation, if certain conditions that ensure mental ease and detachment—wakefulness, the smell of grass, a walk in the park on a June evening—had not been regrettably absent.

First the rats climbed up. They climbed up as though they had been driven out of their homes, caught up in a collective movement that could no longer be explained as the chance encounter of several individual raids but, by its extent, suggested the rise of subterranean waters, suddenly welling up from our inadequately tamped soil. The Ortignies district was submerged now and the rats were beginning to overflow towards the centre of the town, where they hurriedly invaded

the cellars, like a taciturn army whose only object is the silent and systematic occupation of a place. One of them would sometimes venture into the upper part of a house and linger there, in the dark shadowy corner of the bare walls, alone with the bird that haunts empty rooms and whose dying voice is heard in the mournful whine of an ill-oiled door; or else it would creep behind the furniture, into those narrow vestries lit only by the gleam of a lost marble; then it would rush through the house, towards the cellar, while a woman shrieked as though the ground were on fire under her feet. . . . She would run down in her turn and knock at the neighbour's door: 'I swear it was Gaston!' And this scene, a thousand times repeated, established the rat's power a little firmer in the town, strengthened the pestilential legend and, stealthily, opened the door to change.

For a change was creeping over the town. It was accompanied by rumours of war or revolution—nobody knew quite which, perhaps both together—and it wore the haggard shape of the inhabitants of the Ortignies district. They formed silent delegations and came to the Town Hall and then to the Prefecture to deposit their petitions for slum clearance, the improvement of sanitary conditions, a reduction in the cost of living, peace, the protection of children; long-felt needs suddenly revived, behind which rumbled the low thunder of their ancient wrath. They had never been so bold. When they had left their petitions they would linger in the streets for a long time, with the strained, conscious dignity, the strict economy of gesture of those who expect to be roughly challenged. They were the last straw! As if their rats hadn't been nuisance enough! They were like blind shepherds following their flocks, keeping careless watch in their minds over the animals browsing faithfully in the pastures of darkness. And behind you, while you were looking out of the window . . . But I won't turn round. He'll go away again, just as he came. If he

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comes too near I'm sure to hear the sound of his feet scuffling on the floor-boards. . . . Behind you . . .

Gaston is watching, Gaston knows  
What a man thinks and where a man goes.  
He is always there;  
Gaston is peeping while you lie sleeping,  
And hour by hour more powerful grows;  
He is everywhere.

Joste discovered this doggerel pinned up in the passage leading to his office. He was coming back from the Prefecture and was surprised not to feel angrier as he read it. But he tore down the paper and crumpled it into his pocket. He pushed open the door of his office. Paulet was in the room, patting three small dogs:

'They're thoroughbred ratters,' he said, turning his head towards Joste. 'I've been lent them for a couple of days. I'm going to take them down the sewers this afternoon. This black fellow's called Totem. . . . Have you seen the latest report? From the Public Health Department this time?'

'No, I've not seen it,' answered Joste, 'and I don't want to. In any case, the day after tomorrow, Gaston's going to be dead.'

'Dead?' cried Paulet, forgetting his dogs and jumping up. 'How d'you know that, Monsieur Joste? and how are we to set about it?'

Joste had sat down at his work-table and was thrusting the latest reports into a drawer, without looking at them.

'You've got no imagination, my poor Paulet. Can't you really imagine Gaston being dead the day after tomorrow? Anyhow it doesn't matter; somebody else has imagined it for you.'

'Whoever has imagined that?' asked Paulet in alarm. 'You're making fun of me, Monsieur Joste.'



## GASTON

'No, it's not I who am making fun of you,' said Joste. He suddenly felt relief at the idea that henceforward there was absolutely nothing he could do. 'Not I, but the prefect perhaps, for do you know, I've just been seeing him.' He quickly and lightly ran through the interview he had had with his superior, without, however, repeating the surprising words on which they had parted. When he stopped, Paulet seemed appalled. 'But we shall be disgraced . . .' he murmured.

'Disgraced?' exclaimed Joste with mock surprise. 'But how could we be disgraced on account of rats? Not so long ago, somebody I know gave me that answer. Don't you remember, Paulet?'

'Times have changed,' answered Paulet in a low tone. 'And you know it better than I do, Monsieur Joste. Now it's like an absurd dream from which you feel you'll never waken. Are we going to betray the whole town? We'll announce that Gaston is dead, and the next day Gaston will come and gnaw at their children's hands.'

'Steady! careful with your images, Paulet!' cried Joste with a forced smile. 'Oh, Heaven protect us from the imagination of unimaginative people! I say, those little dogs of yours look lively enough. You still haven't told me their names. . . .'

But he could not stand any more, and felt unable to keep up this tone. He suddenly hid his face in his hands. How had Paulet expressed it? oh yes, 'an absurd dream from which you feel you'll never waken.' But waking was not the only way out. Every dream has two exits, like a house standing in the middle of a field. Wouldn't it be a relief to find oneself out in the open, on the further side, having slammed the door once and for all behind one?

Paulet went on talking, the dogs scratched themselves. Paulet said he would go down there. He had two clear days before him and he'd bring back Gaston, if it meant spending the nights down there with his three ratters. It wasn't worth

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shedding tears about, anyway. But Joste was shedding no tears. He was in that lonely house in the middle of the field, standing by the back door that a dismal wind kept banging, and that he would open only at the last minute, when, beyond it, in the morning sun, a man wearing the smile of an expected visitor would come gently knocking, hiding a she-wolf behind him. . . .

There was one Sunday before Gaston's execution; yes, as though by chance, there was a Sunday, that sort of sudden holiday, that blank day that occurs in the middle of a scene of passion or of mourning, like some uninvited guest who stands awkwardly swaying from one foot to the other, stupidly battenning on your despair. Joste went back to his office after lunch. Through the windows he could hear birds calling. On the square, poorly dressed men and women, obviously from the Ortignies district, were walking round and round and then going off, irresolutely, lifting their eyes for a last look at the façade of the building. Then Joste let drop the curtain he had raised. He took refuge in his consuming loneliness beside the hairy foe with whom the thoughts of the whole town associated him.

To distract himself from his anguish he opened the books in which he had once thought to read the secrets of those he was fighting. He was deep in study when, towards evening, he heard Paulet's familiar footstep in the passage. His assistant came into the room without knocking. He carried a big cardboard box under his arm.

'How did you know I was here?' asked Joste.

'I didn't know,' answered Paulet breathlessly. 'I didn't know, I came up on the chance. I simply had to see you. . . .'

He remained standing on the threshold without laying down his cardboard box, oddly accoutred in boots, a beret and a torn overall.

## GASTON

'Well, you wanted to see me; here I am!' cried Joste, irritated by Paulet's immobility and silence. 'Why are you stuck there? Can't you shut that door?'

Paulet obeyed and laid down his box.

'Whatever are you carting around in that?' asked Joste with a contemptuous irony which was not usual with him. 'Your trophies of the chase?'

Paulet had got back his breath. He went slowly up to his boss's desk.

'Monsieur Joste,' he said, 'I've got Gaston . . .'

'Gaston!' cried Joste.

But already Paulet had bent down towards the cardboard box. He thrust in his hand and, when he withdrew it, there was . . . NO! Suddenly, there was evening, evening falling over the Arabian desert, from the depths of which 'a hundred years later', as history vaguely tells us, emerged the brown rats of Asia. Never before had rats so clearly revealed their kinship with the creatures that crawl between the parched lips of the earth—salamanders, spiders, gleaming reptiles: accursed species, in whose veins ran the same perverse, translucent blood as in theirs. At the end of its endless tail, endlessly ringed like the chains that bind the damned, silky and bristling with fine hairs like a barbed whip, dangled an enormous rat, as impressive, suddenly, as an edible carcass, with a black patch on its back. It was Gaston, his eyes closed, seeming somehow stronger and more complete in that appearance of profound self-contemplation that results from death, no longer merely present but understood, weighed and measured as over a market stall.

'Oh,' murmured Joste, terrified, 'I'd never have thought . . .'

But Paulet was bending over his box once more.

'What are you looking for?'

He stood up again.

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'No!' Joste cried. 'No!'

It was a second Gaston, as fleshy as the first, as contemplative; but within this one's body there burrowed, worm-like, an embryonic purpose.

'Eight! There are exactly eight of them in this box!' said Paulet, throwing the corpses of the two rats on to the floor with a gesture of disgust. 'All that I could carry. The dogs killed fifteen or sixteen of them, maybe more. . . . If you only knew! It's been an unending battle since yesterday. We were making a hellish din. Up above, people were collecting round the drain-pipes. All night. They hurt two of my dogs. I'm scared, Monsieur Joste. . . .'

Joste did not answer. He sighed, then stood for a few minutes in silence, his hands laid flat on his desk, staring at the scribbles on his blotting-paper.

'Paulet, go to the window, please, and tell me what's happening out on the square,' he said at last in a weary voice, without lifting his head. 'No, don't put on the light. On no account show a light! They'll know we're here quite soon enough.'

Paulet hesitated, then, regretfully, walked to the window and lifted the curtain: 'It's growing dark. There are people strolling about. What else d'you want me to tell you, Monsieur Joste?'

'What sort of people are they?' asked Joste, hammering out his words. 'Do you know them? Are they really the sort of people that we're used to seeing? Do they really seem to be strolling about?'

'Monsieur Joste, you frighten me!' cried Paulet, turning round. 'I don't know what you're getting at. Yes, they really are strolling about.' He pressed his nose to the window-pane once more. 'At least, they give one that impression. Well, you know, I can't be sure. You ask such strange questions. . . . And then it's growing dark and I can't distinguish them very

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clearly. There's somebody limping. No, he's stopped limping . . . Two others, over there, in caps with leather peaks. You're quite right, I'd never noticed that some people wear that sort of cap. Oh, and over there in that corner to the right. . . . But after all, what does it matter? I can't be expected to know all the inhabitants of this town! And then, if you stare at people for a long time you notice curious features about them and an odd way of walking. . . .'

He shrugged his shoulders wearily and, turning suddenly round, took a step forward into the dark room.

'Curious features, an odd way of walking,' repeated Joste dreamily. 'In a word, they aren't people from these parts. I'm not making you say it, Paulet. People from Ortignies no doubt, or from other Ortignies whose existence we never suspected but which are already sending their advance guard upon us. . . . Paulet, let's reason calmly. Gaston represents a new race, doesn't he, an unknown and dreadful species?'

'Yes,' said Paulet with a sigh, 'and that's just what frightens me.'

' . . . A species that's never been mentioned in any of the books we read?' Joste went on. 'Neither in those that describe the rats of Europe nor in those that describe the rats of Asia, Africa, Oceania or America. A species that no naturalist has dared to imagine or foresee? A species that we've never seen even in our dreams, an uncreated, unthought-of species? Do you agree?'

Paulet nodded.

'And this species,' went on Joste, 'is encroaching under the town, has established itself there after driving out the species that lived there hitherto. Our rats, the ones we have always known, are taking refuge in houses, surrendering their haunts to Gaston. No books had foreseen that, had they, Paulet? Not a single book?'

'No,' Paulet muttered, 'not a single book.'

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'You're wrong, though!' cried Joste with an expression of gloomy triumph. 'On that precise point, a very old book has told us something. Wait, wait. This is what we read in that good old book where, by chance, this cruel, glaring truth of ours has inserted itself in the midst of a jumble of scientific information: "Rats mean invasions; each horde has its own rats. Every occupation of the land's surface implies a corresponding occupation of the subsoil. The Goths brought their rats, so did the Vandals, so did the Huns; there have been Norman rats, English rats, Tartar rats and Muscovite rats. And one could count the successive layers of invasion our land has endured by the number of varieties of rat that it has successively nourished. . . ."'

'The invaders . . .' murmured Paulet. 'But, Monsieur Joste, where are the invaders today?'

Joste shrugged his shoulders. 'D'you think they'll arrive, or have arrived, blowing bugles and waving flags?' he cried in sudden anger, leaping from his seat. 'D'you think they'll need to come right up to you and shout their names in your face? Couldn't they creep in amongst us, one by one, wriggling their way in casually between the groups of people? Is it really not conceivable that you might find them one evening, when you go home, installed in your house like an old creditor who's lost patience and sits waiting for you, doesn't even get up when you come in, doesn't give his name, and seems to be saying quietly like a resigned judge: "You see, I had to come in the end. . . ." Without your being surprised at it? Is all this really inconceivable? I ask you!'

'I don't know,' muttered Paulet. 'Perhaps you're right after all, Monsieur Joste. But if they're coming like that, if they've already come, what are we to do?'

Joste had gone up to the window and lifted the curtain: 'There's only one word left that'll make sense, in that case. A word that makes you want to close your eyes and that

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might even lull the dead in the depths of their darkness, a word that nothing can wear out, that sheds no light on men's faces, admittedly, that makes us one with the simplest things, with the earth itself, a word that has fostered Gaston for centuries and that caused the deepest burrows in the earth, those that we never suspected and those that seemed to us uninhabited, to be full of the interminable preparations of the silent world, a word that's like an old worn blanket thrown over the back of Time, the only word that happens. . . . Yes, Paulet, now there is nothing to do but to "wait" . . .'

## *The Cat*

The whole thing actually began with a rather trying scene, quite unlike anything they had hitherto experienced. It happened towards the end of June, during one of those difficult post-war years, a few weeks after Rose and Pierre Berthold had got married.

They had just rented a furnished room in the flat which the Pradiers, a successful business couple, had managed to secure at an exorbitant price but which was somewhat too big for them. The Pradiers were unpretentious people, with the free and easy manner that goes with rapidly-acquired wealth, and they were too much absorbed in their business to bother about formality in matters that were not directly connected with it. Instead of waiting till they were settled in their new flat to receive their future tenants there and show them the room they proposed to let, they invited the Bertholds to take possession of the place before they were ready to occupy it themselves. It was all decided quite suddenly over the telephone, one evening when the day's business had been concluded more expeditiously or more profitably than usual.

The new flat took up the whole of one floor of a big old house in the centre of the town. The Pradiers had arranged to meet the young couple in front of No. 112, a number which, as evening drew on and the bustle of the busy streets died down, began to assume a cabalistic significance. This happens whenever you become conscious of the fact that Fate is there, with its golden numbers skilfully distributed amidst the *grisaille* of directories, registers, calendars, cadastral surveys or the migratory flight of birds. . . .

The sudden hush of evening, the somewhat oppressive



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atmosphere of the streets, which still retained the heat of the day, and above all the failure of the Pradiers to appear punctually at the rendezvous, increased Pierre's anxiety.

'If only they'd come, if only they'd come!' he kept repeating, twisting his fingers nervously.

Rose said nothing. Her husband's impatience was so disproportionate to the slight benefits they expected from their move that she did not even try to intervene. She would learn soon enough what it was that he hoped to find inside No. 112, and of which he himself was only obscurely aware.

Anxiety, indeed, seemed Pierre's natural condition. He was a man of thirty, rather short in stature, with a perpetually pensive air, and quite lacking in that subtle quality which is known nowadays as 'presence'—a disturbing expression which, however, is used too lightly to allow those to whom it does not apply to enjoy the miraculous compensation of being actually out of the world without having given up life. A certain awkwardness resulting from his unimpressive physical appearance inhibited him, in daily life, from making any sort of expansive gesture. And his natural vitality, being constantly frustrated by fears and taboos, tended to dissipate itself in frequent indeterminate gestures and constrained attitudes that bore every appearance of anxiety; whereas really Pierre, who was accustomed to his own awkwardness and knew how to steer his way between snags, often enjoyed complete tranquillity.

That evening, however, his anxiety must have been authentic, for when the Pradiers at last emerged from a nearby street he seemed greatly relieved. A swarthy man in black was with the Pradiers. 'I'm in on this deal too,' he said to Pierre a few minutes later, using the curt business jargon which alone seemed likely to ensure fair play in future competition.

These words appeared to vex Pierre intensely. He knew that some of the rooms in the flat were better arranged than others

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and, drawing Rose aside, he whispered to her that he was worried now lest he should not be able to secure the best of them.

The flat was on the fourth floor. A wide uncarpeted staircase led to it, past doors on which gleamed the brass plates of business firms and professional men. They went up in almost total darkness and stopped on the fourth landing. Behind the door of the flat a cat was mewling. M. Pradier, gnawing at his red moustache, hunted through his pockets for his keys; when at length he pushed open the door, the cat arched its back, purring with feverish excitement. It had probably eaten nothing since the departure of the last tenants, who had abandoned it two days before. The two women, Rose and Mme Pradier, bent over it somewhat nervously, instinctively aware of the venomous power of hunger, of the demoniac transformations it could bring about. The cat fled and the two women tried in vain to catch it.

Pierre alone took no part in this display of cautious compassion. He was carefully examining the big hall, trying to guess at the layout of the flat. He remembered hearing that there was only one dressing-room with running water, and he cast a rapid glance along the walls looking for the pipes. To gain possession of the water-supply seemed as imperative a task to Pierre as if he had been a general at the head of his army, entering a half-conquered city.

Guided by the water-pipes, on which the paint was flaking off, he hurried ahead of his landlords and pushed open the door of the first room on his right. He found himself in a dressing-room arranged in a recess at one end of a big room lighted by two french windows. He noticed that the blue cover of the settee matched the material of the curtains screening the recess, that the furniture was almost new and yet in tolerably good taste, and that the oak floor was gleaming—or at least that over a large part of its surface the light was shimmering softly.

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It was still the light of day, scattering angular shadows, but failing fast and almost baffling his attempt to take stock. Already each floor-board, each piece of furniture was secretly a prey to night's weevils. And over it all there hung such a discreet glow, such stillness. . . . Pierre opened the door on to the hall and called Rose; he had made his choice.

'No need to look any further,' he told her when she stood by him. 'We'll have this one and no other.'

Rose ran her eyes around the room, without daring to step inside. Night was falling fast and it was a wonder now that she could carry on her scrutiny in such darkness. Something creaked, and she clutched Pierre's arm nervously.

'Yes, yes,' she said, 'you're quite right.'

They closed the door again, and guided by the murmur of voices they joined the others, who had meanwhile disappeared into the depths of the apartment. None of the rooms through which they passed now—and they were unexpectedly numerous—was so pleasantly arranged as the blue room. Pierre took good care not to point this out to his landlords when he caught up with them. He took them along to show his choice: 'We needn't bother seeing any others,' he said, 'since this one suits me perfectly.'

'Suits me too,' put in the other prospective lodger when Pierre opened the door.

They stood for a moment motionless in front of the great bare room, lonely in the evening light. It was one of those uncertain moments when twilight seems to linger although night has fallen, when everywhere else people are stumbling against furniture and groping for lamps, whereas you sit in your room, leaning your cheek on your hand, gazing at something in the window and in the sky that seems reluctant to die and perhaps will never die. . . . And they stood in silence, as though the threshold that they dared not cross marked the boundary of a forbidden zone.

## BEASTS AND MEN

Meanwhile, however, Pierre was scheming to draw M. Pradier to one side. He succeeded at last.

'Well, what d'you say about it?' he asked in a low voice.

'Why, I declare you've chosen the best room in the house. So I'll give you my terms,' said Pradier. 'It's a room quite unlike the rest; that must be taken into account. Besides, I realize it suits you. So I'll put my cards on the table; four thousand.'

'I accept,' Pierre said. 'I can even pay you a month's rent in advance.' He put his hand to his pocket, but the other stopped him.

'There's one thing more,' went on Pierre, who mistrusted agreements made too quickly and wished Pradier had accepted his suggestion. 'The hotel's costing me a lot. Could we sleep here tonight?'

'Of course,' answered Pradier, 'but I'll have to see my wife and ask her if everything's in order. Wait for me here. Monsieur Viau will keep you company.'

He stepped into the hall: 'Why, my dear Viau, what are you doing there in the dark? Come along over here! Where's my wife got to?' he called.

'She's gone into the room,' the other said, drawing near. Pradier went off.

'He's accepted,' said Pierre to Rose, who had come up beside him. 'I wonder why he doesn't give us some light,' he remarked to Viau, whose figure he could now make out before him, a dark shape in which the face formed a lighter patch.

M. Viau shrugged his shoulders. 'He must have his reasons. I've known him for a long time; he never does anything without good reason. I'm not implying that you need be mistrustful of him; nobody's more reliable than he is in business matters. It's a very fine room. Yes, you've really made a good choice.'

## THE CAT

'You don't mind my having done you out of it?' asked Pierre, who was at last beginning to relax.

'No, all things considered, no,' answered Viau. 'It might have suited me, but I've been thinking things over. I've got my reasons too. . . . But that doesn't mean I think you've made a mistake.'

They stood for a moment in silence, in the darkness. At the far end of the hall a light shone out suddenly through the half-open door.

'I'd like to go and see what they're doing,' said Pierre, who felt entitled now, as tenant, to take this liberty, especially as it was in 'his' room that the light was shining.

He went along and stopped a yard from the door. Pradier and his wife were standing in the middle of the room.

'Well, there we are,' Mme Pradier was saying. 'Everything's straight now. You must admit nobody would have guessed the floor was stained just there. . . .'

'You're right,' Pradier answered, 'and then, as I told you, I don't believe it was that at all. I've always heard that it happened in the little passage. They must have carried her in here afterwards and she must have come to again. . . .'

'That's not the question!' cried Mme Pradier. 'I can't think why you go on worrying about exactly what happened. That's nothing to do with us. There was a big dark stain on this floor, I couldn't care less about how it got there. All that mattered was getting rid of it and being able to show a clean room. The other evening after washing it I couldn't be quite sure, because the wood hadn't dried. This evening when we got here I was afraid it might still show. But now I'm quite satisfied. Come on, let's go. . . .'

They opened the door and saw Pierre.

'Here you are,' said Pradier, pointing to the room with an impressive gesture before switching off the light. 'You are at home.'

## BEASTS AND MEN

A few minutes later they were in the street, where they parted company.

Pierre and Rose hurried to their hotel. Half an hour afterwards they were bundling a few suitcases into a taxi. Pierre kept on touching his pocket to find, through the cloth, the key of the flat which Pradier had given him; this queer piece of metal, the like of which he had not possessed for a long time, now made him the equal of those men who were going home late through deserted streets, stepping firmly, indifferent to everything, self-confident, established in the world of property, and, as they clutched their smooth-surfaced keys, as unmindful of the terrors of night as though they were armed with knives.

'Well, what's up?' he asked Rose, who sat huddled in a corner of the cab. 'You're very quiet!'

The passing gleam from a street-lamp showed him his wife's face. She had closed her eyes, as she did whenever, overcome by the sadness of life, she took refuge in surrender and, as though envying the dead their peace, imitated their blindness and inertia. He groped for her hand and held it, like one long acquainted with her torments. The gesture brought solace chiefly to himself. Rose's unhappiness was liable to drag him deep into a sort of stormy darkness that had ceased to rage deafeningly but was present all around behind the illusion of daylight. But, if he held Rose's hand, he no longer feared the darkness of hell, and sometimes at night when they lay side by side he would excitedly imagine them walking together through eternity, amidst glistening rocks and crazy birds. . . . Rose gently withdrew her hand. The taxi was bowling along the black avenues.

'And then there's that wretched cat,' said Rose, as though a long discussion had led up to this remark.

It was quite true! Pierre had completely forgotten about the cat. It had vanished so quickly that nobody had thought about

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it when they were leaving the flat. No sooner had Rose uttered the words than Pierre imagined he could hear the cat's soft footfall running away from something unknown in the depths of a deserted house. It made him obscurely uneasy.

'We shall have to give it something to eat,' he said, his brow puckered. 'I wonder what, though—all the shops are shut.'

He pressed his face against the window-pane in the hope of seeing some lighted shop or stall. But since the war the town went early to bed.

'Perhaps it's not even had anything to drink,' suggested Rose, her interest reviving. 'Why, none of us thought about that just now.'

On trial again! Always something left undone or done unfairly, somebody hardly treated. . . .

'Listen to me! We're not going to worry our heads about a stray cat!' cried Pierre, annoyed by this fresh source of anxiety. 'Is it our concern if it's hungry or thirsty? Is it our fault?'

'No, but it's beginning to be our fault,' said Rose. 'It always happens like this.'

Pierre did not answer. 'Where will it be when I open the door?' he was wondering. He remembered that the cat had come right up to the door when Pradier had unlocked it; it must be a domestic pet. But he imagined it, nevertheless, prowling about the depths of the huge dark rooms, at the far end of that mysterious domain they were about to possess, emaciated, sharp-clawed, sniffing at a dark stain on the floor. . . . The taxi had just stopped in front of the house, all the windows of which were dark.

'The best thing would be to kill it, evidently,' said Rose as she got out of the cab. 'Nobody'll want it. And I can't stand cats, particularly that cat.'

Pierre was busy taking out the luggage and did not answer.

## BEASTS AND MEN

'I might say what all women say—it's something physical,' Rose went on. 'But it wouldn't be absolutely true. It's just on the border-line.'

She uttered the concluding words in a slow, hushed voice, as though striving, through narrowed eyes, to discern—under the faint mist rising from a rain-wet wood—the edge of the straight-ploughed field of rational thought.

Exertion had brought back Pierre's good humour; carrying a heavy suitcase in each hand, he said with a smile: 'On the border-line of nonsense, in any case . . .'

Rose said nothing. She was climbing up the stair behind him, carrying a suitcase too, and leaning on the banisters, which shook a little.

'To kill it . . .' she went on after a moment. 'But how could you kill it? Oh, I don't enjoy talking about it! I've thought of everything—throw it outside? But it would mew in the staircase and the neighbours would come and complain. . . . With a stick, perhaps. I've heard that if you give them a tiny tap on the nose they die. . . . The thought of it's making me ill. . . . And then you'd never have the courage. . . .'

Pierre had set down his cases on a landing to take breath. The light had been turned off automatically and he had to grope along the wall for a long time before finding the switch to turn it on.

'Stop talking nonsense!' he cried, his courage growing in the darkness. 'You know quite well that we won't kill the poor creature!'

'Why not?' Rose replied. 'It's getting on your nerves and you won't admit it. You were so pleased to have got this room and since you discovered that cat was there you've grown worried and glum again. Admit that you want to kill it; I'm only talking about it to make it easier for you.'

'There's something worse than the cat,' said Pierre, seizing his suitcases.



## THE CAT

'Worse than the cat?' asked Rose timidly. All her curiosity was aroused and yet she was afraid of learning the secret.

But at that moment a mew sounded through the huge sleeping house and upset them again.

'How much higher have we got to climb?' cried Pierre angrily. 'It's incredible; we're only on the third floor.'

'I won't go in till you've put on the light in the hall,' said Rose. 'I'm frightened . . . everything's so sinister here.'

'Sinister!' exclaimed Pierre. 'Goodness, what grand words to use about a wretched cat!'

At last they were at the door. Pierre turned his key in the lock, went in and pressed the switch of the hall light.

'Where is it?' he could not help asking in a loud voice, before taking a step forward.

Rose followed him, looking carefully and distrustfully around her.

'Go and open the door of the room and turn on the light, for God's sake,' she said, clearly on edge, to Pierre, who stood there motionless.

He obeyed. The cat was sitting in the middle of the room, quite still. Pierre did not wonder, at first, how it had found its way into the room, but he noticed that one corner of the settee, covered in blue repp, had been torn to shreds by its claws.

'Oh, so it's there,' said Rose dreamily, as she followed Pierre into the room. She did not seem to be surprised by the mystery.

'There's nothing extraordinary about that; it must have slipped into the room while we were here, an hour ago,' Pierre replied, to forestall his wife's panic. 'Look what it's done.'

He pointed to the damaged cover, but Rose only gave a fleeting glance to the disaster. She could not stop staring at the cat.

## BEASTS AND MEN

'Well, why don't you speak to it, call it, do something?' cried Pierre. 'It's not sacrosanct!'

To set her an example he called out 'Puss!' in a curt, imperious tone, feeling somewhat ridiculous. The cat had not moved, and went on looking at them, narrowing its green eyes.

'Are you going to kill it?' asked Rose with naïve anguish.

'We'll see, we'll see,' answered Pierre, exasperated. 'Please, Rose, let me bring in the luggage first. . . . If you knew how tired I am!'

He was about to leave the room, but changed his mind and went up to Rose. 'Silly child, you mustn't be sad. . . .' Rose smiled, her heart heavier still, and kissed him. She leaned her head against his. Yes, thus they could face the storms of death, travel along the unending tunnels, run through the black thorn-bushes, walk down the steps to the pit. . . . If only there'd been birds crying, tossed by the wind, high up in the sky. . . . But no—there they sat, the two of them, side by side, their heads bowed over the same task—the old, daily task; and only the stain on the floor, over there in the corner, was stirring like an anthill.

'Come on!' said Rose, breaking away from his arms. 'Let's get it over. . . .'

The cat had disappeared. Pierre brought in the luggage. Rose was sitting down, motionless, her hands clasped, under the feeble lamp-light; thus would she appear one day, in some distant cell of time, before the pitiless judges of the last silence. She heard a faint cry from the neighbouring house: 'Sister Anne! Sister Anne!' She passed her hand over her brow; then everything was still. Pierre had just returned to the room. With his cases at his feet he stood there as motionless as she, his hands on his hips, like a workman prepared for fresh exertion. Rose watched him as he stood there quite humbly, ready to spare himself no trouble, and she felt the need to postpone what would inevitably happen.

## THE CAT

'D'you really like this room?' she asked him.

Now she saw it in all its ugliness: the rust-spotted mirror above the grey marble mantelpiece, the Venetian table with its unsymmetrical twisted legs, the ferns patterned in monochrome on the blue wallpaper, ridiculously distorted where the strips of paper met. . . .

'Why, yes, for want of anything better,' said Pierre with a shrug of his shoulders. 'After all, it's our first room; the hotel wasn't *us*.'

'And is this *us*?' said Rose, without any trace of indignation in her voice, as with a jerk of her chin she indicated the empty space before her, four-square with just a dark shadow like an eye in each corner. 'Pierre Berthold, pull yourself together! Don't you realize that we've been letting ourselves be led like children and that we were practically pushed into this room? Why is everybody against us—everybody without exception? Come on, Pierre! Tell me why they're all against us?'

'They're not against us,' said Pierre, beginning to pace backwards and forwards. 'They're just indifferent. It's quite natural. They've made it all seem quite natural! What right have we to expect them to be fond of us?'

'What right . . .' sighed Rose.

With her head still bowed, she was examining the floor, on which the pieces of furniture seemed to be set out as irrevocably as if their feet had been wedged. She caught herself thinking that she would have to polish the floor because of the dark stain she had just noticed.

'Where's that cat got to?' she asked suddenly, lifting her head. 'You'd have done better to wring its neck.'

Pierre shrugged his shoulders and left the room.

In the hall, the cat scurried off just under his feet. He followed it, calling softly. One after the other they darted down passages of whose existence Pierre had had no notion, and through the remotest rooms in the flat, where he had no time

## BEASTS AND MEN

to put on the light and which were lit only by the dim night-glow of the city.

The cat still fled and Pierre now pursued it as doggedly as though his salvation depended on the success of this blind chase.

From the room, Rose heard the footsteps die away in the depths of the apartment. She suddenly thought: suppose, when they returned, they brought a stranger to her? 'Listen to those footsteps!' Now they were confined to a series of brief journeys to and fro among the furniture, now they calmly skirted an obstacle, now they stopped; the listener always has the feeling that a murderer is at work in the house. . . . Rose had got up, but the darkness that reigned in the neighbouring rooms made her hesitate and she finally stood leaning against the frame of the door that led into the hall.

'Why, Pierre, what have you done with it!' she cried, solely in order to get an answer, as, seized with panic, she heard the steps drawing closer to her.

The stranger was crossing the last room with a heavy tread, taking an interminably devious route (probably to avoid a table), and now he was approaching sideways, like the dead, laboriously, so it seemed, and it was as though the hour had struck and here was the judge with his hollow-sounding step. . . . Rose could not make out his face yet, and this guessed-at presence assumed an importance which, in another minute, would make her howl with terror.

Pierre emerged into the light. He seemed to notice his wife's wild look. 'You didn't really think I was going to kill it?' he said. 'I've managed to shut it up in a sort of linen cupboard at the end of a little passage that leads into the rooms at the back. That part of the flat is full of surprises—for instance in the passage there's a little window with coloured glass. The moon's shining through it now. Come and see. . . . Don't be afraid!'

## THE CAT

He took Rose by the hand and she followed him through the rooms, which were lit up by the rising moon. He crossed them with the confident pride of previous experience, pointing out each obstacle in advance, making a careful inventory of this dead world. Thus, day by day, he would drag her a little further into his wilderness: 'Why am I so docile?' Rose wondered, and at the same time yielded to her love, which was deeper than love itself and bound irrevocably to a fate like Eurydice's.

She'd never expected the flat to be so huge. At intervals, between empty spaces, her hand touched the polished surfaces of the pieces of furniture Pierre was identifying one by one. Suddenly the air was colder; Pierre had just opened the door into a passage.

'Just look!' he said. 'It's as pretty as stained glass.'

Little diamond-shaped panes of red and blue were half-hidden by an opaque curtain.

'It is stained glass,' Rose answered. 'It's only that there aren't any saints in it. . . .'

Pierre seemed not to hear. 'The cat's shut up in there,' he said, pointing to a door let into the panelling. 'But I'm afraid of its suffocating. Just now it was scratching at the wood inside. It was making a hell of a noise!' he cried loudly, as though he wanted to tell the whole world about the creature's evildoing.

Roused by the sound of voices, the cat began to mew.

'Oh! is it going to start up again?' cried Pierre angrily. 'Are we going to have to stay up all night on account of it?'

'Well, let it out,' Rose said. 'It won't eat us.'

'You're right, after all,' replied Pierre. 'But we'll have to be careful. Suppose it were to jump up at our faces? Eh, suppose it were to jump up at our faces? I'd like to have a little light in here.'

He examined the passage at some length, but found no

## BEASTS AND MEN

switch. He came back to the little window and, standing on tip-toe, pulled back the black curtain—a relic of war-time—which half-covered it. The moon, which had meanwhile risen high into the sky, shone full on the cupboard door. It shone also on a large dark stain spreading out a little further on, along the wall. Pierre drew closer to Rose; he could not take his eyes from it.

‘Oh, they might at least have washed it off,’ he muttered, horror-stricken.

‘Open the door, open the door,’ begged Rose, clutching his arm.

He obeyed. The cat sprang out and turned to face them, hissing. They drew back, but the cat had already fled towards the end of the passage. Pierre followed it as far as the hall, where the animal leapt out through an open window looking over a narrow courtyard. Pierre leaned out; from the black well there rose no cry, no sound of any fall. He came back to Rose. She had not stirred, and was shivering from head to foot. Then Pierre led her along, without a word, through the dark deserted flat at the end of which lay waiting the room in which they were to begin their married life.

## *The Dogs*

We were taken through a huge courtyard, at the eastern end of which stood a one-story building honeycombed with kennels screened with wire netting. It was late in the afternoon. The sun was sinking above the woods and the very ground told me the time, for the pebbles cast deep shadows like a lining of impalpable clinkers, providing me with one of those insubstantial landmarks to which I am wont to refer clandestinely when I am in some official situation in the company of others.

The day had been particularly hot, but it seemed as though I had not realized it until that moment, when the sun was stretching out its last scorching rays and scoring the ground with a thousand black notches, as though to make us think, by emphatic underlining, that we were in Africa. I have always dreaded that oblique hour when the dark couch-grass glows amidst the meadow-grasses, when the leafy crest of the woods is a grey blur in the evening light and the Rhine, forsaken by its current, lies slack as an empty sleeve.

'Here we are,' said the Commandant, turning round as we reached the end of the building where a door gave on to the kennels.

I recognized the smell. I had noticed it a little earlier from the far end of the court-yard as I entered the gate of the enclosure, but so vaguely that I associated it unconsciously with the heat of the hour, the baking weariness of the day and the glowing light—as though somebody, somewhere, was fiercely polishing a piece of inferior copper with a bit of old hyena-skin.

'A hundred and thirty dogs, gentlemen; we have here

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exactly one hundred and thirty dogs,' declared the Commandant, leading the way into the narrow passage with a row of boxes on either side.

As though they had been trained to respond with theatrical promptitude to the Commandant's announcement, the inhabitants of the kennels had come up to thrust their muzzles against the netting; they faced us in a frenzy of jubilant animosity, their jaws quivering lightly as they prepared to bark, expecting much, despite the barriers that closed them in, from these figures that had drifted amongst them with flapping garments and tempting white hands. There was a final second during which they were still silent but were just about to bark, and which made us so acutely conscious of being virtually their prey that the horror of being bitten filtered through the protective netting as through a coarse-meshed sieve.

It was not until we had passed along the passage-way that they realized their impotence and began to deafen us with their baying, leaping upright against the netting and showing their bellies, covered with short white hair, and the jutting canine penis, sheathed but swift. Each of them in turn, seeing us go past his box, dropped back on to his paws and in bewildered frenzy ran round and round within the narrow space in which he had hitherto served his apprenticeship to cruelty, interrupted now by our unexpected intrusion into the familiar rota of challengers.

Others, meanwhile, remained reared up, their forelegs pressed wide apart against the netting, their heads thrown back for a final howl, obsessed by the attraction of man, displaying their bellies like dead foxes'. A sort of sweeper who was coming towards us shrank aside to let us pass, leaning against the metal screen without modifying by his weight the violent jerks that shook it. Then he slid like a guilty ghost along the aisle between the dogs.

This man's excessive humility, which seemed uncalled for



## THE DOGS

either by the officers' presence or by our own, despite our ostensibly official character, surprised me and I asked the Commandant what the man's duties were.

'He's an odd-job man,' answered the Commandant in a tone of surly indifference, 'a Czech or a Pole, a former D.P. We use a certain number of these men for menial duties. . . . Have you come across Belgian wolfhounds?' he went on, anxious to get back to the object of our visit. 'You see, we may quite possibly adopt them here one of these days. I can foresee your objections. . . .'

'We had gone through the whole building and come out into the yard. A few isolated barks still sounded behind us, suggesting not so much real fury as the sulky aftermath of a sordid fight—the picking up of the pebbles, black clogs and broken branches scattered about the scene of the scuffle. . . .'

'And yet the Belgian wolfhound is incontestably stronger than our Alsatians,' went on the Commandant. 'He has far greater powers of resistance to hunger and cold: and these are highly desirable qualities in the field.'

I secretly admired the serenity with which he spoke of these ordeals, which he himself would have to undergo. He was a man of about fifty, square-faced, broad-backed. His temples were close-cropped under the forage-cap of dark cloth; a few sparse dark hairs grew on his hands. From head to foot he belonged to the army. How could such an adult attitude be possible, but for the army? Now, through him, the army made terrors seem tame and war became a periodic promotion to the order of cold, hunger and death, a costly rubric which would have to be spelt to the last word with lips as dry as the Commandant's, for no other reason, perhaps, than that 'it was written so'. Destiny has no better army than ours.

We had crossed the courtyard once more and reached the place where several young officers were waiting for us in

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chattering, laughing groups which were joined by late-comers even gayer than the rest who swooped down, laying outstretched arms round the nearest shoulders, and thrust their bright faces into the circle with a look of quizzical curiosity. They all turned round together as we drew near, saluted their leader and fell into step with us.

'Is everything ready, Duval?' asked the Commandant, without turning round. 'The dummy?'

'Yes, sir,' replied the officer with respectful alacrity. 'The dummy too. . . .'

Certain words, when uttered unexpectedly by people who normally seldom—in theory, never—have the occasion to use them, assume a disquieting portentousness. They awaken in one an unconscious but prudent mistrust; thus I suddenly became aware of an unfamiliar ring about that substantive, which had travelled so far in its tailor's apron and oil-cloth cover to become a hostage here, soon no doubt to be subjected to a cruel ordeal. What was it doing here, on this torrid evening, that dummy, that dark figure inhabited by a lonely ghost?

However, I asked no questions of the Commandant. He walked on in front of me along the narrow bank, which now overlooked a sort of stadium. A little further on, a wooden platform furnished with seats jutted out over the arena. When we had reached this the Commandant stood back, inviting us to take our seats in the front row. Nothing was happening as yet. Behind us, the officers were noisily settling down under the thatched roof. For there really was a roof—it was made of loosely-plaited sheaves of rushes through which here and there a few hot yellow sunbeams filtered; a fragile shelter where, in the oppressive hush of evening, a sort of ritual tribunal was assembling, careless of the cause to be judged and turning nonchalantly to watch the display of savage justice.

A sergeant had just brought into the arena three hounds

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on a leash. He unfastened them and began to perform with each in turn those exercises that soldiers call 'square-bashing': forward march, halt, about turn; movements of a puppet or an automaton which, performed in that vast lonely stadium by this elderly soldier with his long-service stripes, passed beyond the bounds of absurdity and took on a character of esoteric grimness.

Actually, the man played only a supporting role in the demonstration, while the dog at his side, absorbed like himself in the dreary parade, advanced without bringing its nose out of line, halted, turned and started off again. But the animal, although it was very big and strong and conscious enough of its task to maintain a proud bearing, seemed somehow to be still 'earthbound' and, yielding now and then to an atavistic submissiveness, to move with a dazed air, merely accompanying the man, who strode along in sudden isolation with the stiff jerky movements of a swinging corpse. This disturbance of the order of things confirmed all the fears I had confusedly experienced since first entering the kennels. The notion that the relations between man and beast were irremediably warped, that the dogs, under cover of perfect obedience, had secretly thrown off man's sway, that the whole place was, in fact, a 'kennels for men', possessed my mind to such an extent that I felt not the slightest surprise when the dummy made his way into the arena.

He was expected there, and the old sergeant who had collected his three dogs gripped them more tightly to him so that the dummy could advance into the enclosure without a single yelp or untoward movement distracting the audience's attention from this solemn apparition. It was a man clad from head to foot in a thick padded garment of strong canvas, horsehair and pieces of cork sewn together, a sort of heavy brown over-all somewhat resembling a diver's outfit—yet here suggestive, rather, of buoyancy, of the impossibility of drowning—or a

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suit of armour made of felt with a narrow opening for the eyes protected by a visor.

The legs and thighs were doubly protected, imprisoned in a kind of framework covered with canvas, while the feet disappeared into wooden clogs and the arms dangled interminably beside the shapeless body, weighed down by mittens stuffed with tow and sealed with pitch.

He waddled forward awkwardly, unable to see us, since his headgear acted as blinkers; he stepped right in front of the platform, wheeling round on the spot like an acrobat or contortionist at the fair heaping up the earth around him before beginning his exercises.

'You are about to witness a few demonstrations of the "assault against man",' said the Commandant, who was sitting behind us, drawing up his chair. 'It's an amazing show. The general himself wouldn't believe his eyes, the other day . . .'

He did not say 'assault on man', but 'assault against man', as though the first expression would have implied an unjustified aggression, an immoral attack on a human being—preferably at the corner of a deserted street—whereas the second, safeguarded by its grammatical incorrectness, was the heading of some section of the regulations for the army in the field, the formula of an order given deliberately and with full knowledge of the facts.\*

The sergeant, in the arena, loosed a dog and uttered a brief word which I could not catch. The animal threw itself on the dummy. He was still turned towards us and did not see it coming. It got hold of one of his arms just below the elbow. The dummy flinched a little under the sudden weight, then, gradually coming back to life as though the pain had only reached him after a long journey through his carapace, he tried to free his arm from the dog's grip. But the animal

\* French: 'attaque à l'homme' as contrasted with 'attaque de l'homme'.

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remained reared up, with arched back, its teeth fastened into the cork armature, while the man, hampered by his stiff clothing, could only struggle with very slow movements, as though he were the victim not of a ravening beast of prey but of the yellow dog of some endlessly tormenting curse.

The sergeant called back the animal after a few minutes; then, I did not understand why, he sent it off to attack the dummy again. But this time he ordered it to halt one yard from its prey. The hound obeyed. 'Go!' cried its master calmly. Once more the animal leapt forward and fiercely fastened its teeth into the man's arm. The torment began again. It fitted in quite naturally with the yellowing light of evening, the sultry heat, the smell of dust rising from the stadium where the man for long ages had been striving to drag away, far from here, his hairy incubus, the creature that clung to him, barely ravening now but half-asleep in its tenacity, as others at that hour were half-asleep in the peaceful sunshine in the long grass. And then the sergeant called off the dog, and sent another after the man, ordered it to stop, let it go, called it back, sent it off again; and the man, under these successive assaults and false alarms, stood stock still, with his legs further and further apart and his long arms outstretched, like a patient on the operating-table. . . . I wiped my brow.

'Look, look!' cried the Commandant, laying a hand on my shoulder.

Now the man was running about the arena, flapping his arms awkwardly, and one could not tell whether it was deliberate clowning or whether the weight of his carapace forced him to make these unwieldy movements. He stumbled once or twice, then suddenly a dog darted out after him, caught him up and leapt high into the air, trying to snap at his wrist. It succeeded. The man tried to go on running and fell. Behind us the officers, moving excitedly in their seats, began to speak all at once.

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'I tell you he didn't do it on purpose!' one of them said very loud.

The dog was called off. The man got up with an effort, and tried to escape again, but once more the dog caught up with him. With a giant's clumsy determination, the man made as though to walk towards us. What could he be meaning to do to us? The dog, which had moved off a little, returned to the attack and gripped him again. Now the man would have to stand still, and I felt an indefinable relief.

Although his enforced immobility was purely for the purposes of experiment, it seemed like a sort of punishment, an arrest which might have been decreed a few minutes earlier when the game seemed to be still going on and the man, without our knowledge, was breaking the rules. Now he was some distance away from us, in a part of the ground over which the shadow of the woods was already creeping, and he seemed like an escaped prisoner caught on the verge of the forest, or like some bulky poacher, some obstinate broad-shouldered incendiary forced to appear, in tragic solitude, on the scene of his crime before submitting to his fetters. . . .

And then once more he began to run towards the wood, in a wild desperate dash, less clumsily than at his first attempt. He was able to reach a little wooden hut and shut the door behind him before the dog, tearing after him, could catch up. Things were becoming dangerously complicated. The dog began to run round the hut, discovered a window and jumped inside. Loud explosions followed as the man let off squibs to frighten his aggressor, in a kind of sinister transformation-scene. But the dog did not come out until the defeated man, stupefied or blinded by the smoke from his own contrivances, had opened the door himself and emerged, dragging that eternal burden fastened to his inert arm, to his old painless wound: a picture by now so familiar that it evoked among the

## THE DOGS

weary spectators ideas of immanent justice and necessity that were all the more acceptable because the sun was setting, night was about to fall and one must go home with peace in one's heart.

This time the man was allowed to come right up to the foot of the platform. He threw back his head and tried to see us in spite of his visor. I could not distinguish his eyes. Behind us the Commandant stood up and brushed the dust from his clothes; the demonstration was over. I nodded to the dummy to show my appreciation. I felt ill at ease under that fixed stare from eyes whose colour I had not seen. The Commandant grasped me by the elbow and led me off.

'Do you never have any accidents?' I asked.

'Oh yes, we do. It sometimes happens that the dummy loses one of his protective mittens in the battle. There's not a man here who hasn't been bitten at least once. Oh, don't worry; it's not always serious. I might even say it's something that has to be gone through—a sort of baptism. After that, a man knows where he stands. It's as well, you see, to be forearmed against a certain sentimentality. The dog is an infallible weapon which we've gone to great pains to prepare, for certain precise, clearly-defined military ends. Nothing more!' he added somewhat roughly, staring at me as though to forestall all the ideas in which I might have been indulging.

We were back in the great courtyard of the kennels. The sun had set. A concert of barks rose from the neighbouring building. It was to go on until far into the night, and even until dawn, forming that background of wrangling, yelping and lugubrious laughter that accompanies certain moonlight nights in summer, in which you can hear far-distant cries from animals that keep watch although nobody is passing except the moonlight walking over the stones.

Dinner was lively at the mess. The next war was being discussed, with that political awareness that is to be found in

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most of our barracks nowadays, particularly those situated on the other side of the Rhine.

'Do you manage to sleep in spite of that barking?' I asked my neighbour at table.

'Oh yes, pretty well,' he replied. 'I've got a simple technique. You pick out one from all the barks and follow it in your mind. I mean, you concentrate on barking mentally with that one dog chosen out of the lot. Of course you mustn't give up immediately, but try to follow it patiently. Every time it barks you make that little inward effort, just as if you imagined yourself rowing in a boat race. And then the miracle happens: you're asleep, and then it's morning. The secret is that one gets tired of barking sooner than they do.'

At the other end of the table the Commandant, his fork raised, was holding a conference: 'Our Intelligence Department informs us that the Russians have a great many of them. Besides, didn't they take over all the German kennels?'

Some young officers were meanwhile carrying on lively asides: 'What d'you mean by "war"?' sternly demanded one young man with a crew-cut, for whom every word seemed to require painful scrutiny. 'Now, exactly what do you mean?'

'D'you hear? That's what we've come to!' said my neighbour with an air of playful complicity. 'Doesn't Lieutenant Mauduit's question express a whole mental conflict? Not so long ago that word war, that worries him so, included countless sorts of treachery, and now the word itself is suspected of treachery; he can't even get hold of it—it's as slimy as a cracked egg. . . .'

I smiled and turned away. He must have been of a paradoxical turn of mind, or else so bored by his profession that he enjoyed making fun of those who seriously 'believed in' it. The atmosphere of the dining-room was full of smoke. It was very hot again.



## THE DOGS

'Do you play bridge?' shouted the Commandant to me, through the din. 'And what about you, Captain Issautier? Will you join us?'

I declined his invitation and slipped quickly into the courtyard lest one of the officers should offer to come with me.

The dogs were barking louder than ever, but it was not so much their yapping and yelping that irritated me as the absurd conflict that it represented. The noises died away as if in retreat, then started up again all together in a shrill comeback, and then suddenly silence would conquer, flowing like black water round some dog standing alone with his legs rigid. The moon had risen over the woods. The church clock of Appenweier was striking in the distance with that deliberation and that feeling of innocence which the measurement of time always brings, even when one's mind is full of distended images, as mine was now because of the dogs.

Just at that moment a man came towards me. His shadow preceded him in the dark night, his gliding human shadow, a thing that can so easily become terrifying as it darts and creeps along in the glimpses of the moon, with that shadowy egg for a head which the stones, one after the other, try in vain to swallow. He asked me to give him a light from my cigarette, speaking with a foreign accent that I could not identify. He thanked me, and seemed not to want to move away.

'You watched the demonstration this afternoon, didn't you?' he said. 'I believe it interested you?'

He had lowered his voice to utter these words and I felt as surprised as though he had suddenly nudged me with his elbow.

'It certainly interested me very much,' I answered cautiously. 'Were you there too?'

'I was there.'

He was silent for a moment and drew at his cigarette, turning his head away towards the darkness as though the

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conversation we had begun was not to be continued and the black sky, for want of stars, was there to engross all our attention.

'... Only,' he went on, 'I was inside ...'

This time the tone of his voice had warned me. 'You mean to say?' I asked in my most neutral, most indifferent tone.

'I was the dummy,' he answered quite simply, even with a shade of relief. 'You know, the man who runs about ...'

'And falls down ...'

Why had I said that? I regretted it immediately.

'Don't blame me for that too!' he cried, turning to face me. 'Since the end of this afternoon everyone's been accusing me of playing the fool and falling down on purpose. It's a fact that I never do fall. Today it was an accident. I wasn't thinking about the spectators or what important people they were.'

'Don't exaggerate their importance; we're merely officials,' I answered, shrugging my shoulders.

He lifted his hand to imply that my protest did not count. He was of medium height and build, whereas a short while before, in the stadium, he had cut an impressive figure in his padded garments; one thought of a tree that had lost its bark, of some thickset young elm suddenly appearing in front of you, as darkness fell, with the bare torso of a girl. It was all very irritating.

'Officials, officials, yes, of course,' he went on gently. 'All the same, you're here to examine and control things. The Commandant must have been furious when I fell! He probably believed that I was trying to bring out the unpleasant side of the demonstration. Or else he took it to be a further proof of his animals' efficiency. You never know what to expect of him. I only know that he despises me or hates me!' he added in a muffled tone.

'I think you're exaggerating,' I replied, surprised by the

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violence of his speech. 'I know nothing about your relations with the Commandant, but it seems to me he's not the sort of man to hate or despise his staff. Anyhow, if that were the case he wouldn't keep you in the kennels.'

The man threw away his cigarette and crushed it carefully with the tip of his boot. I had already grown accustomed (and I was amazed and disturbed to discover, once again, how strangers can sometimes make us feel that we have known them before) to his silences, to those pauses during which he seemed to wander far away into some long-lost land of mists and birchwoods to find his strange, mournful arguments like the sound of some single-stringed viol, his false-seeming truths, his motley-clad self-justification.

'Your logic isn't the logic of the kennels,' he went on, shaking his head. 'The Commandant can't help hating me because my job is to be the enemy, the dummy, the target! I'm using these synonyms on purpose, so as to give you every chance to find one ounce of pity in them. The Commandant has got to do his job, he wants to do his job; he has to share the dogs' reactions. *You must remember that it's always simpler to believe.* Here, we're deeply involved in a cruel myth. Whether it's necessary or not is a question I shan't touch for the moment. We're all playing a part in this myth—the Commandant above all. And when evening comes, because even in myths there's always a time when evening comes, why should he alter his attitude? . . . You see, it's like when you go hunting. The hunt goes on all day in the wet woods and the marshes and it comes to an end when night falls. Then if only the huntsman would leave the woods and go into the open fields he'd find me, the real me, there in front of his cottage in the fields, without my mask of a boar's or lynx's head, and then both of us would be at peace in the last light of evening. But the hunter's tired, and without even taking off his boots he falls sound asleep in the little

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hunting-box down in the dark woods, in the marshes, and he keeps his hounds beside him, all of them. For the hounds hate me too and dream of tearing me to shreds. Would you like me to prove it right away? See, I'll go up to the building where they're shut up. They won't need to catch sight of me through the netting in front of their cages to know I'm there. They'll feel my presence, they'll guess I'm there. Then you shall hear! Do you know it can be like the sea, the sea!' he repeated wildly. 'Just now it's only their usual harmless chattering. But when I draw near they'll shake the building till the walls start tumbling down! The Commandant will drop his cards and come out on to the doorstep of his little hunting-box: "What's happening? What's happening?" Would you like me to repeat the demonstration for you?'

'I'd rather you didn't,' I answered in some distress. 'Let us go back to your explanations instead. I was only half convinced by them, for after all, for all your eloquence, what have you done to get out of the wood, to escape from the hunt?'

'At least I've changed my clothes!' he cried with a forced laugh, twitching the lapels of his linen coat with a ridiculous gesture. 'And I'm here talking to you, trying to see things, to see things . . .'

'Of course, but meanwhile mentally measuring the distance between yourself and the dogs and confident, serenely confident, that by taking a few steps you can let loose a storm on the other side of the courtyard. I'm not blaming you for anything. Only confess that, even now, you're relying on the hatred of the Commandant and the dogs' formidable sense of smell. And I'd just like to know who are the people that cling to the myth, in this place.'

The man was silent again for a moment. Then he said: 'I spoke rather wildly just now when I offered to go near the dogs and excite them merely by my presence and, naturally,

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you thought I was proud of my power, that I got considerable satisfaction from keeping up the game. You may have believed that. But it's not true, I swear to you!' he cried. 'I'm outside the game. I'm quite ready to love the dogs, all the time, not only in the evening! Believe me, I'd give anything if this cruel business could stop, if I could go near the kennels without driving a hundred hounds wild, if I could go and speak to the Commandant as I came up to you this evening.' He dropped his voice: 'Try and imagine what my life is like with those dogs always at my heels!' he whispered, as if up to now we had said nothing. 'Every time they rush at me they hope that at last their teeth will reach my flesh. And every time they are frustrated, but it's such a near thing! I feel them there, on the edge of my flesh. It's like walking on a tightrope; sometimes it makes you dizzy. . . . And all day they bark at me. They follow me with their eyes when I walk alongside their building. They're aware of me, or long for me, when I'm in my room. You can't imagine how easily one's whole world is filled with that howling, that hollow hatred. I sometimes tell myself that I shall still hear it in the pit of hell, lapping like water against the brink. I tell myself that it's all up, that eternity itself is full of it and that every child that's born is a soul that's been lucky enough to escape from these dog-fights. These are fearful ideas, aren't they?'

I was about to answer but, behind us, in the heart of the darkness, a door opened, disclosing a square of light. Some officers came out. They were talking loudly and walking towards us without seeing us.

'Don't let's stay here,' I said to my companion, drawing him away towards the far end of the courtyard where the trees began and the shadows were deeper. By taking this step I was giving myself up completely; I was shedding all the caution I had hitherto observed. It was not exactly friendship yet, but that sense of companionship in darkness which brings two

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beings together as accomplices, bridging the gulf between them and the emptiness of their own hearts. He followed me in silence, awed perhaps at such a swift promotion.

'All that you have said,' I went on when we had reached the edge of the wood, 'is extremely convincing. You've given me the key I was looking for. I'm not saying this to flatter you or to imply that you're right on every point. Probably others hold the key as well as you. Yes, when I came into this enclosure, I felt that things were not as simple as they seemed. I can't express it better: the dogs, the part they play, their masters and the part *they* play, in short, this hierarchy of utilitarian relations established between them, did not satisfy my mind and still less my heart. So then, we are agreed on the main point, but we mustn't get carried away. I'm going to ask you a very simple question: between ourselves, why do you stay here?'

'Do you suppose I'm free?' cried the man (I had not yet asked his name). 'Of course, you don't know my story yet. Well, let's start from the beginning again!'

'I'm not forcing you to do that,' I retorted, hurt. 'If you've as little freedom as you say, please take advantage of the freedom I'm allowing you—the freedom to keep silent.'

'You've misunderstood my meaning again,' murmured my companion, with a sudden gentleness which made me believe for a moment that I had indeed a morbid tendency to interpret his words unfavourably. 'I said "let's start again" because it's a sort of Calvary for me, and the beast must be flogged if it's going to reach the summit. . . . The summit!' he cried with that forced laugh that exasperated me, 'the summit is Stanislaw. Who'd have thought that horrible town, bogged down in the snow, was the summit of anything? The people there have German names, or Polish or Czech names. Thus my name is Franz. I'm a Russian now. I was a Pole once, but my parents were Austrian. They might just as well have been

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Rumanian or Czech. You see, my nationality's evasive—rather, I'm swarming with nationalities. I belong to the cross-roads. It makes your head whirl to think of it all. Geographers say one thing and ethnographers another. They provide our conquerors with endless alibis. And what are those alibis, actually? Because we're situated at the intersection of precarious frontiers, they make us out to be lying quartered, all ready for the ravens that haunt our plains. And, all things considered, the ravens are in the right. . . . See here: I was studying law at the University of Lwow. War broke out and I joined the army. We were very proud of our boots, tall black boots of very supple leather—they were the best boots in the Polish army. I kept mine all the time I was a prisoner in Germany. What else can I tell you? When the war ended, I didn't go home.'

'That's just the point,' I replied. 'Why didn't you go home?'

'The Russians were in Stanislau, my relations are all scattered. I had some idea of going to America. Those are the ostensible reasons that made me stay here, the reasons I've given a score of times when I was questioned by the Allied authorities of the D.P. camp. They're good enough reasons from the social and historical point of view. At any rate, thanks to them, I belong to a definite type of individual—an awkward, classless, unadaptable type, but reassuringly common and real. Actually, I only run along beside it, as if it were a vehicle into which I shall never manage to climb. Yes, I tell you, a sort of vehicle. The others sit there singing timidly and then they're silent, staring round-eyed while the apple-orchards of the West file past them. And I run after panting! You see, all this is quite ridiculous and unreal.'

'And now?' I asked.

'Now?' said Franz, starting a little as if my question had caught him in some criminal act. 'Now? Well, I stay here because I know . . .'

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Steps were coming towards us. It was a group of officers, talking loudly and from time to time scattering sparks from their cigarettes through the darkness.

'Let's go further off,' said Franz. 'They'll never leave me any respite!'

I followed him, but in order to keep a reasonable distance between ourselves and the officers we were obliged to move near the kennels. The barking, which I had not heard for the last few minutes, grew louder. Until then I had believed that all the dogs were already on the alert in their unsleeping hate, and now I discovered that our presence awoke an endless brood of them, that their world, increased a hundredfold by the magic power of night and rage, was opening out terrifyingly and that, as long as we stood there, there would always be a last fang ready to probe and stir up a newer and blacker depth of darkness.

I was frightened. 'You'll give us away,' I called to Franz through the noise of howling dogs, when we stood in front of the building.

He turned round in distress towards the white wall of the kennels, then slowly drawing back he said to me: 'Let's go, let's go,' and began to run.

I was about to follow, but the clouds that hid the moon's face parted. I stayed where I was. The officers were only a few yards from me.

'What's happening?' asked one of them sternly, stepping ahead of his companions and coming up to me. 'Oh, it's you,' he went on in a gentler tone. He turned back: 'It's our guest, sir!'

The Commandant hurried up. 'Who was that man who ran away just now?' he asked.

'One of your men, Franz,' I answered quickly, as though anxious to justify myself. 'He wanted to prove to me that the dogs guessed at his presence through the walls of the kennels.'



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And it really happened, so much so that he was frightened himself. . . .’

‘Don’t believe a word of it! Don’t believe such nonsense,’ cried the Commandant. ‘Now listen . . .’

He came close to me, took my arm roughly and stood motionless beside me. The barking went on in a confused and deafening chorus, swelled by a fresh yelp every second as a new beast, suddenly shaking off the swaddling-bands of silence, was affected in its turn by the spreading movement which, within that dark enclosed space, created unsuspected distances, devious relays like those that cover the countryside at night, with its animal cries, or hills on summer evenings with their mysterious glimmering lights.

At last the Commandant dropped my arm. ‘Well, aren’t they still yelling just as loud? And yet our friend Franz is far away. Now you understand; these dogs get bored and when they scent a human being’s presence, as they do at this moment, they ask us in their own language to let them out. You see how simple it all is, my dear fellow; you’ll never find the slightest mystery here.’

‘And I’m not trying to find one, sir,’ I replied. ‘The man had come to speak to me, we had a chat together. . . .’

‘Oh, I can guess what he told you!’ cried the Commandant delightedly. ‘Never in my life have I met such a complex, puzzling person. Don’t you agree, Issautier?’

‘He’s a Pole, sir,’ replied the officer thus appealed to, emphasizing the subtlety of his comment by his tone of voice.

‘True,’ said the Commandant. ‘Those people can’t get rid of a certain atavistic romanticism. But that’s not all; Franz harbours definitely subversive feelings towards us and all that we represent. I have no hesitation in saying so.’

‘Quite right, sir,’ said Captain Issautier, and began to talk to his companions; I could not catch what they were saying.

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'I would not go so far as to accuse him of being a Communist,' went on the Commandant. 'For one thing, because he refused to go back to his country, and for another, because the opinions he airs are rather more peculiar. More dangerous, more subtle, and in any case displaying a certain egocentrism that you don't find in Marxists. Something not far removed from anarchy or nihilism. In our own country and even here, in Germany, the words sound obsolete, I know. But let's make no mistake about it; they're still firmly rooted. It's too simple to assume that we've conquered these opinions (and these alone) by explaining them psychologically. They contain the germ of a sort of mass individualism, mark my words—of mass individualism whose effects we shall continue to feel. To get back to our friend Franz, I tell you straight I'd rather he'd been an open Communist and then we'd have known what we were dealing with.'

'In any case, you seem to know your staff well,' I said to the Commandant.

'Yes and no,' he answered gruffly. 'Not too well, actually. What makes you think I've any special knowledge of that man we were talking about? I'm a bit of a psychologist, that's all—I got like that from coping with the dogs, and I've learnt a bit about him by the way. Not much, actually, and no more than Issautier, for instance. Isn't that so, Issautier?'

We were walking towards the mess and the officers were following a few yards behind us.

'Pardon, sir,' said the officer he was addressing, who, talking to his companions, had not heard the Commandant's last remarks until his own name was pronounced.

'I was explaining to our guest that we're not specially interested in that man, you know, that fellow Franz,' repeated the Commandant with a shade of irritation in his voice.

'No, of course not,' replied the captain, 'at least, not specially, as you say, sir. Only his duties . . .'

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'His duties!' cut in the Commandant. 'They're not so important as all that. In any case they're only quite provisional. His duties! Isn't that rather a highfalutin' way of speaking? Oh, let's talk about something else!'

The officer beat a retreat and discreetly joined his companions. But it struck me that the Commandant was not so very anxious to talk about anything else. He had grown surly. While we were drinking a nightcap at the mess bar, one question was on the tip of my tongue: why did not the Commandant fire Franz if he knew him to be so ill-disposed? But I felt that nobody here could give me a direct answer to that question. And yet all the circumstances seemed favourable for ordinary life to prove its enduringness, and human logic—for lack of any warmer virtues—to maintain all its rights. Nothing, in short, but that constant clamour, those uninterrupted bayings revealed the existence, behind the façade of everyday behaviour, of an obscure, ill-settled quarrel, an old lawsuit where rights and wrongs were all confused. Yes, there was nothing but the belated and biased testimony of the dogs, addressed to the shadows of the moonlit walls, of the trees, of the stones, to everything that had no ears to hear, to all those forms in the night, including even the forms of men, which were soon to disappear without having understood: to all those speechless and mindless actors, involuntary participants in that absurd lawsuit where one of the two parties kept obstinately appealing for help with a thousand voices, like a tribe about to be defrauded or a chorus of injured orphans: to all things that were encamped on the earth at that hour, even to the pebbles on the road.

I pleaded fatigue and went quickly to my room. I had been in bed for some little while, vainly trying to win sleep by reading an old military manual, when someone knocked gently at the door. I went to open it. It was Franz.

'I saw a light under your door,' he said. 'I thought you

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must still be awake. I wanted to ask you to forgive me for going off in such a hurry just now. . . .’

I had opened my door wide on recognizing Franz. The light cast by the bedroom lamp into the passage allowed me to see that he was holding a young hound on a leash. Franz had followed my glance. ‘I’ve adopted him so as to try to be reconciled with his species,’ he explained with a smile. ‘It was thanks to him that I found the door of your room. He’s very good at picking out a scent already. I just gave him this to smell—you’d dropped it, and in any case I wanted to return it to you before you left.’

He held out a handkerchief which that morning I had slipped into the breast-pocket of my jacket to wipe my sun-glasses with. ‘You let it fall just where we stood talking for such a long time. I happened to pass by the place. I remembered that at one point you wiped your forehead. And besides, it’s got your initials on it.’

So he knew my name. There was something puzzling about the loss of that handkerchief, in itself a commonplace incident enough, and the advantage Franz had taken of it.

‘Why didn’t you follow me, earlier on?’ asked Franz.

‘But I had no reason for following you! I wasn’t at all anxious to let the Commandant think I’d been doing something wrong. . . . But don’t let’s stand here chattering,’ I added crossly, thinking that we might be overheard in the neighbouring rooms. ‘If you want to explain your sudden flight, come in here. Anyhow, I shan’t keep you for long because we’re going off very early in the morning and I must get some sleep.’

Franz appeared not to notice my ungraciousness and came resolutely into the bedroom with his young hound.

‘You’re quite right, there was no reason why you should have followed me,’ he said, sitting down uninvited on my bed and gripping his dog between his legs. ‘You must realize that

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if I ran off it was not because I was afraid of facing the Commandant but because of the horrible noise those dogs were making on my account. The damned beasts . . .’

He raised his head. Outside in the night his face had seemed younger. He had sparse fair hair, drawn features and a widish mouth.

‘They’d drive a man mad, sometimes . . .’

I did not answer. I was examining the young animal lying at his feet. Its pointed muzzle, upright ears, and light, almost unmoving eyes bore witness to its kinship with the inhabitants of the kennels, but showed their characteristics in a simpler, finer form, revealing the sharp symptoms of savagery at an earlier stage of naked innocence.

‘Don’t let’s exaggerate,’ I answered at last. ‘No doubt the dogs were barking very loud. But it wasn’t entirely on account of your presence. It was just as much on account of mine.’

‘If only that were true!’ sighed Franz.

‘But it is true,’ I cried, irritated by his play-acting. ‘When the Commandant and the officers came up to me, at the very spot where you and I had been standing a few minutes earlier, the animals went on making the same noise. The Commandant pointed that out to me.’

Franz raised his eyebrows with a resigned air and thrust the young hound back between his legs as it struggled to get free. I was used to his silences, but this one irritated me particularly.

‘For one thing,’ Franz began at last without lifting his head, ‘once they’ve become aware of my presence, their hatred doesn’t die down immediately. They remember me long after I’ve gone past and therefore they don’t stop barking at once. Particularly if you were there with the Commandant and the officers, so that the presence of human beings, even if it represented nothing precise to them, stimulated their memories. There’s a certain stage, in cruelty, where

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all flesh smells alike. And that's true about love too. . . . And then,' he added, feeling that this time he had hold of a decisive argument, and raising his head, 'what proof have you that their barking had the same tone, once I was gone? It was still as loud, no doubt. . . .'

He was looking at me. The young dog too. I nodded.

'All right,' I said meekly. 'But, between ourselves, do you think this can go on?'

I was at the end of my tether. Once more I could hear the baying of the dogs, of which I had managed to become oblivious before Franz came. The fact that my companion's young dog was not excited by the barking surprised me at first, then I understood. To him it was neither a call nor the echo of a sudden quarrel, of some disturbance liable to arouse his curiosity, but on the contrary he seemed, by his apparent indifference, to be in silent harmony with a chorus whose meaning he understood, and to represent the mute advance-guard of a pack of hounds whose deafening uproar was temporarily restrained.

'I think it can go on a little longer,' answered Franz. 'I told you just now: I might go away but I'm staying here because I know. . . . But perhaps my strength will fail me in the long run.'

'Explain yourself, for heaven's sake!' I cried. 'What's the secret knowledge that obliges you to stay here?'

'I'll try to tell you,' he answered, giving a friendly tap on the muzzle of his dog, who was tirelessly endeavouring to free himself from the grip of his master's legs. 'You may think I'm mad or swelled-headed; I don't care. It's like this: I'm staying here because, thanks to the dismal duties I perform, every day and almost every hour brings me, as it were, a revelation of war. That's not quite the way to put it, because you might tell me that any soldier on manoeuvres has that experience as much as I do. I would reply that his is only a sham experience,

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whereas mine! . . . But if we argue like that we lose sight of the truth, of *my* truth. So I'll go further and say: war is only a frightful and, after all, occasional word, but behind it lies all the stealthy horror of our time, the nameless struggles, the anonymous sufferings, the everyday oppression, and, already widespread through the world, the "state of being an enemy". I'm in that state in relation to the dogs; for them I am, unequivocally, *the* enemy. And for the others . . . Let that pass. I'm pursued, tracked down—one step more and the dog will pounce on me. I'm always defeated, automatically derided. What more is needed, I ask you, for them to stop talking about the realities of war and to throw me into a prison cell one evening—and for the sergeant to come and blow my brains out. Between ourselves, why shouldn't they do it, or rather, how many more reasons will they need before they do it? Reckon them up!

'What you're describing is, after all, only the picture of a kind of bondage,' I answered, somewhat baffled.

'A bloodstained bondage!' exclaimed Franz. 'A moment of truth in the midst of that general torpor that prevents people from realizing—I won't say the shape of things to come, but of things that are already there, looming through the fog of dawn! Every day I experience the horror of our time, a bloodless horror as yet, while millions of human beings live in drowsy indifference, with their trivial worries and their petty psychoses, waiting for some general mobilization or even for some great flare-up, and make their own mental picture to their own scale—a terrifying profile no doubt, but one that bears no relation to the face of the Great Horror, that night of the world—I see it looming through the morning fog, like another sun, when the dogs are tearing at me and I'm running to escape them, and they catch hold of me again, and I fall down, on the edge of that prophetic wood! . . . And this is my answer to your everlasting question: "Why

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don't you escape for good?" Because somebody has *got* to know, because amidst the general unawareness somebody has got to make use of this revelation, because only thus, when the hour strikes and darkness falls on our world, it won't have been quite complete, and at least it won't all have happened without our knowledge. . . .'

'And because, in fact, it necessitates a Messiah,' I added.

'I'd foreseen that,' said Franz, rising. 'You're accusing me of pride. But let me point out that I have no sort of ambition to communicate a message. I merely assume, after my fashion, the duties of the human conscience. You seemed to have some curiosity about my story. . . .'

'A friendly curiosity, Franz,' I replied hurriedly, so as to atone for the irony of my previous words. 'Actually, what I perceive in you is not so much pride as a certain complacency about your own sufferings, for after all, while I can understand how important your "revelation" must be to you, and while your words have moved me deeply, why need you prolong this vision, this martyrdom? Isn't it enough for you that you *know*? Couldn't you now withdraw and wait, with that knowledge, until the unavoidable bondage spreads and swallows you up again, or until war annihilates you with all the rest? For although it's an inspiring thing to have knowledge, ought one for that reason to cut oneself off from the community?'

'And during all that time there would be nobody left?' cried Franz, alarmed. 'Nobody left to have that valid, patient, daily experience of the horror of our time and of the times to come? Nobody left to avert surprise, to redeem our pitiful unawareness. . . .'

'But what mysterious redemption is this that you're aiming at?' I asked Franz. 'You make me uneasy. Honestly, now, by what right have you taken on yourself this mission that you feel bound to accomplish? Who has imposed it on you? What



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superior power, what ideal—unmentioned and probably non-existent—urges you to assume it? Yes, what power, what ideal, if not *yourself*? Yourself, with your need for atonement and sublimation. I spoke of pride just now, I should rather have said egocentrism. . . .’

I was standing upright before him now, in the narrow wooden-walled room, ill-lighted by a naked electric lamp. We were launched into one of those fantastic scenes when you talk too much and too eloquently, when you forget about sleep, walking to and fro, your brows furrowed with thought, past the black mirror of the window-panes, hunting for the clinching argument, discovering, in a sudden silence as murmurous as a sea-shell, that night is passing and is about to grow pale, and that people will soon be walking in the bend of the hills, and that you’ll hear them. . . .

The young hound was sitting still at Franz’s feet, its nose turned towards the window, looking utterly detached and irrelevant, just as in certain paintings representing scenes of bloodshed a greyhound is seen lying in one corner, displaying a repellent placidity that gradually absorbs and concentrates the horror of the crime, the grimacing passion of the figures, even the useless brilliance of the sky.

‘Egocentrism?’ repeated Franz, as though stumbling against this scholastic term. ‘That’s a word I’ve heard before. Did the Commandant speak to you about me this evening?’

‘The word isn’t his exclusive property, so far as I know,’ I answered, thus finally betraying that, by choosing the term, I had involuntarily remembered the Commandant’s remarks.

‘Did he speak to you about my family too?’ asked Franz.

‘Why should he have spoken about your family, since you yourself don’t know what’s become of them? At least that was what you told me.’

‘Yes, I did tell you that,’ answered Franz with a smile. ‘But perhaps that was only a general truth. I could talk to you

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for a long time about those people who have no name in history, whose life depends on a negative principle over which they have no control, who are neither one thing nor another, despite the multiplicity of foreseen or foreseeable cases, and who are quietly moving into that sort of limbo where, beyond the bounds of your Manichean universe, they will endlessly macerate in the guise of the homeless, the classless, the outcast, in a dreary and unlimited freedom. . . . Yes, I could talk for a long time about that. But it's late. I must be going. I've wearied you enough already this evening. . . .'

He suddenly seemed in a hurry to take his leave, and held out his hand to me with a smile, ruthlessly indifferent to the irrevocable character of this farewell.

'Goodbye, Franz,' I murmured with a sudden rush of feeling, in spite of his display of casualness. 'If you come to Paris, ask for me at the Ministry.'

'Of course,' he answered, moving away into the darkness of the corridor and tugging at his young dog's leash. 'Do you hear them starting up again?'

I listened. Outside the dogs had begun to bark once more. Franz had reached the landing. 'Do you know why they're barking now?' he asked me in a casual tone as he was about to start down the wooden staircase. 'When I tell you, you'll understand how it sums up the whole of my story: they're barking because day is breaking.'

When I came down from my room a little later, after a bare two hours' sleep, it was no longer dawn, but the morning was still radiant and cool enough to keep the dogs in their kennels from finding peace (but would they ever find it now?) and to make Franz's last words, expressing his proud insensate wish to identify himself with the world's most startling truth, linger dangerously in my mind for all their absurdity. My travelling companion, an official who never opened his

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mouth and fulfilled our itinerant mission with boredom and, as it were, with his eyes closed, made his appearance at last.

Our car was drawing up to fetch us when the Commandant came out of the building. No doubt he wanted to say goodbye for the last time. No—he had come to ask if he might accompany us to Brisach, where we had to visit the bridge unit of the engineering corps.

‘I shall bring a couple of dogs,’ he said. ‘I planned it all a long time back with Colonel Vauduy who’s in command there—a delightful fellow. He’ll let you see a crossing of the Rhine “by human energy”. It’s a wonderful opportunity for me to see how my animals will behave on board a landing craft. Besides, you’re still my guests and tonight I shall bring you back here, for I’ve something of a treat in store for you, I think. No, no, don’t refuse! We’ll have a big dinner in your honour too. I’ve sent out invitations to people from twenty miles around. The pick of the officers from the whole region will be coming—you’ll meet them and talk to them—and their wives’ll be with them; we’ll have dancing. And then there’ll be the treat I promised you, a sort of exercise, or something better still. For you’ve seen nothing yet, my dear fellow. . . .’

I invited him without further formality to join us in the car, and then I asked about the dogs he intended to bring.

‘It’s all arranged,’ he answered, ‘they’re following us in a jeep.’ The car set off. The Commandant, sitting beside me, tried to persuade me to accept his proposal for that evening. I pleaded our heavy time-table, my fatigue after six days’ travelling, my anxiety to get back to Paris quickly. But these were all false pretexts intended only to delay the acceptance which my lips had already formed as soon as he had issued his invitation, half-hearted reservations concealing the pleasure which for some unknown reason I felt at the thought of seeing Franz once more.

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In one of my pockets I discovered the handkerchief that he had brought back to me when he came to my room, an ambiguous symbol that would have made our encounter seem like some uneasy idyll but for the smell that pervaded it from the touch of a dog's muzzle, a smell that ran through it like a dark thread and cast it, quite apart from its whiteness and its equivocal flimsiness, as a clue in my path; it lay, like a water-lily on a black stream, on the trail at the end of which, having blindly followed some unknown scattered scent, I stood waiting now, quietly, stupidly waiting, unharmed and unexcited, waiting at the end of a thread leading to the dogs.

But I suspected Franz of having stolen this handkerchief from me, which, obviously, did not simplify things. He could only have stolen it at a moment when nothing was threatening to separate us, when we were walking along side by side, talking together in the darkness, and this implied that, in performing so deliberate an action (the word 'guilty' never crossed my mind), he must have been forewarned of the briefness of our encounter and, at the same time, anxious to renew it elsewhere, even with so trivial and material an excuse as this 'souvenir'.

It was true, too, that here, 'souvenirs' of this sort might, thanks to the dogs' scent, have their lives secretly prolonged; things you had thought safely buried in the past still held you forever tethered, as on a dog's leash. Time made little difference, and, far from dissolving this connexion, strengthened it. The day before, an officer had shown me an example of this. Dogs were now used at Appenweier for the detection of land-mines. The results were most satisfactory. Not because the creatures were in any way attracted by the smell or magnetism of the metal article hidden in the ground, but because in the course of time the earth around the incongruous buried object began to dissolve in a sort of cryptogamic flowering, the odour of which rose to the surface. Thus the longer the

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mine had been buried, the more powerful was its olfactive presence. And it seemed to me that this handkerchief of mine, sunk deep in the darkest oblivion, might, as the very element in which it was exiled decayed a little more each day, connect me by one of those slight bonds by which we are often unconsciously fettered (in this case, a slender thread of smell) to that July evening in the kennels, to Franz, and finally, irrevocably, to the dogs barking in the night.

'O.K. for this evening,' I said to the Commandant. 'I'll join the party.'

He leaned back in his seat, and then all at once we were on the bank of the Rhine which, thanks to the beauty of the morning, had become a feature in that map of salvation where groves stand in proud greeting, hills spread inviting curves, and great rivers flow full-blooded and friendly.

Officers of the engineering corps were waiting for us. Waiting seemed to be an essential part of their duties—sometimes for recruits, sometimes for reinforcements, sometimes for the fall-in, for the general's visit, for war, then, when war had come, for that general's orders—creating thus, by their final attitude of readiness, that rough-hewn block of marble, the army, on which a drowsy nation can lean. The sun was already high in the sky. On the German bank of the river, where we were standing, some young soldiers, stripped to the waist but wearing their helmets—peasants from the Yonne or the Vienne, caught up in some mythology that had endowed them with nakedness and the equipment of warriors—were preparing to build, with the help of their chronometers, a metal bridge to be thrown across the stream on rafts, and for which the girders had just been unloaded at their feet.

At the very edge of the water, other soldiers were coming and going, and then each would settle down alone beside some bush. Each of them had his 'walkie-talkie', and, leaning

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against the bank, became absorbed in telling some interminable tale, like a child talking to itself about its woes, sometimes raising a melancholy gaze towards the water along which glided a motor-barge from Switzerland, blue and yellow and beflagged with washing.

We crossed the river on a motorboat and landed on the French side, from which the attacking boats were to start. The Commandant held his dogs close to him. They were whining gently and slobbering in a typically canine confusion of feelings, in which boredom and desire were inextricably mingled, and in which the succulent savours of the river-banks must have alternated interminably with the snakeskin surface of the Rhine, the two being interconnected in that machinery of enticement which is an animal's hell. Nevertheless they were still terrifying, and none of us would have dreamed of stretching out a hand towards them, but I had begun to discover that their ferocity was like an infallible trigger (set at some distance away), a gleaming relentless trap around which hung a narrow zone of scent where, in a quivering mist, you might for a brief moment hear the whines and moans of a shadowy dog that welcomed man's caresses.

The exercises began as soon as we had landed. They were to be carried on all day. Every five minutes the soldiers, with touching faith, dashed into the landing-craft, hurled smoke-bombs on to the opposite side, started up their engines by means of coiled-up ropes, like tops, then lay flat on their stomachs in the bottom of their craft, with a clumsy haste that in real war would have meant ten deaths. They then dashed straight for the opposite bank, while the heavy barges from Kehl, Thurgovia or Flanders slowed down in mid-channel and nosed their way cautiously through the brown smoke of the petards, like bewildered ploughmen amidst a flock of starlings, and the green water creamed round their high bows.

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Evening found us on the bank, surrounded by boats that had been hauled out of the water, by an entanglement of bridge-girders and by non-commissioned officers endeavouring, amidst the general confusion, to get their men together.

'Let's get off,' said the Commandant, who was growing impatient. 'They'll all be waiting for me at my place.'

Dinner, at which some thirty guests were present, was a lively affair, shot through by those sudden flashes of light that the first stage of intoxication brings and which, amidst all the hubbub, shed their glow as readily on some unimportant piece of silver-plate as on a phrase picked out from the buzz of talk, or a face, or a laugh, or a woman's bosom, scattering through the opaque air zones of dazzling fixity like the triangular gleam of crystal. It was soon high time to go out. Ten o'clock striking from the church clock of Appenweier found us all standing outside under an amazingly unfamiliar moon, towards which every face was upturned in a sort of aspiration or rapture, as though night had suddenly enclosed us with asphyxiating prison walls. The talk died down. The Commandant, raising his voice, urged us not to separate, and stepped quickly up on to the porch:

'I thought it would be a good thing, even somewhat romantic, to interrupt this delightful evening for a walk in the woods. That's why I am inviting you now to witness a performance which, for the ladies, will, I hope, be nothing more than a pleasant entertainment, while those of us who are concerned with military things will find it a highly instructive demonstration. A band of commandos has already gone off into the forest. It consists entirely of dogs, except that a few men, their masters as we call them here, are accompanying them. What is their mission? What is the purpose of this exercise? I shall explain it to you as briefly as possible. Let us

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suppose that these buildings form the advance line of a battle-front—outposts, in short. Beyond the skirt of the forest, which you can see from here, lies a no-man's-land through which our patrols and those of the enemy are moving. Enemy watchers are posted there. They observe the movements of our patrols, communicate them to their forces in the rear by field-telephone, allow themselves to be outflanked and then catch us in the rear with their automatic weapons. All this for the simple reason that unless we happen literally to fall upon these look-out men—and in any case they would have the advantage by being able to shoot at us—we could not guess where they were. Therefore, before venturing into the wood, we shall send in a patrol of dogs. Creeping and gliding silently through the thickest brushwood, guided infallibly by the scent of men, they will pounce on the look-out men, taking them unawares; they will leap at the men's throats and, with luck, bring them down silently. Our men will merely have to go through the woods with their hands in their pockets and surprise the enemy outposts, which have been relying on their watchers. These, then, are the broad outlines of the manœuvre. Three men dressed as dummies have gone on into the wood. They have been given no orders, except to stay there until the dogs come. They're allowed to use any ruse they like. Our hounds are waiting for us at the edge of the forest. And now, my friends, let's be going; I'll lead the way. . . .'

The Commandant jumped down from the porch and took me by the arm as he passed: 'Keep beside me. . . .'

We walked quickly through the courtyard. Behind us the officers and guests were hurrying breathlessly; it was like a wedding-party summoned to a fire. We found the animals and their masters at the edge of the wood, half-hidden among the bushes. The night was of uncertain brightness, with channels between clouds, gulfs of moonlight, beaches and ocean depths,



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evanescent shores—while below there was only the mild night, lifeless except for the intermittent shiver of leaves and now a threat of rain.

The dogs, held on the leash, stood quiet. They were a little less erect than they had seemed the day before, as though they had shrunk into mere domestic creatures, out too late and shortly to be sent home to bed, and would vanish swiftly into the night from under the busy, beclouded sky.

‘Come on, come on,’ cried the Commandant impatiently to the dogs’ leaders. ‘The show’s beginning. . . .’

In a rustle of leaves the men bent down to unfasten the dogs’ leashes. Then they urged them forward with voices that had once been cowherds’ voices. Behind us the guests and the officers were chattering.

‘They’re off,’ the Commandant told me. ‘Let’s follow them at a distance.’

We began to make our way forwards through the wood. From time to time the Commandant switched on an electric torch and turned it towards the group that was following us to light up the path. The guests were growing noisier and shouting warnings to one another. ‘There’s water here! Beware of that branch! A ditch!’ Laughter rang out, and the dogs crept forward in front of us like an insidious fire, breathing among the leaves; if we had been walking behind them with lanterns and music the contrast could not have been more intolerable, the cruelty of that moment more acute. I could easily imagine the three dummies, and I could imagine Franz— for he was there too, I felt sure—lonelier than the others, more proudly erect amidst that darkness into which our band of merry-makers was intruding; crucified there, while around him lay sleeping Europe and he tried desperately to gather it close to him, but in the end the hounds of darkness would set their teeth in its heart.

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'We've got one of them, we've got one of them!' cried the scouts who were following the dogs.

The Commandant ran towards them. I followed him. He switched on his torch. Two dogs were pulling along a man clad in the heavy protective overalls, a docile prey who, now that the game was over for him, was vainly trying to talk to the animals.

'We shan't need you any longer, Andrei,' shouted the Commandant. 'It's O.K. You can go back to your quarters.'

The leaders called off their dogs, and the man, now free, strode clumsily past us giving a military salute.

'What d'you think of that?' asked the Commandant. 'They didn't take long to unearth him and, you'll notice, they had to bear a good way left to find him. Ten of them can cover a stretch of ground at least a mile wide and as deep as you like! They comb the ground, there's no other word for it.'

He switched off his torch and we started off again. Ten minutes later, far to the right this time, we were informed of a second capture. We did not attempt to make for the spot. I regretted this; it might have been Franz. I could not resist an urge to inquire about him from the Commandant.

'That man we were talking about last night, and with whom I had a few words . . . Franz, isn't it? Is he taking part in the exercise?' I asked.

'Certainly, and indeed I believe he's left alone in the wood now. I don't imagine he's the one who's just been caught. He would have come up to show himself. He's a very strange fellow. The truth is that he cannot forgive himself for having left his family over there and at the same time deserted his country. He hates us because we represent his desertion—or something of the sort, you get my meaning . . . but I'd like to make him swallow his hatred and put up with it to the bitter end. There are a lot of people who, like him, wallow in their shame, their cowardice or whatever it happens to be.

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Like a dog in a puddle—only it's you who get splashed in the end. I'll have none of that. In any case, what I say about him . . .'

'But he told me he had lost his family,' I answered.

'Oh, that's what he says!' cried the Commandant wearily. 'After all, it doesn't matter much. All that matters now is that we should get a firm hold of him!'

We walked on for a long while without speaking. The guests and the officers had tired of walking, or had lingered behind with the women, and we could no longer hear them behind us. The darkness had suddenly grown dense again and, with a sense of fulfilment such as one only finds in dreams, I felt myself one of a significant trio, with Franz and the Commandant for sole companions, in the heart of a midnight forest where our secret accounts were perhaps to be settled—debited with a suspicion here, credited with a reticence there.

We walked on. I was beginning to feel tired. The Commandant was quite silent. Only the scouts could be heard now and, at intervals reverting to my ordinary lucidity of mind, I wondered what, after all, I was doing there. And then suddenly there was a noise of barking some distance ahead of us.

'I think we've got him this time!' cried the Commandant, and before I could open my mouth he darted forward.

I followed him, but presently caught my foot against a root and fell, hands foremost among the dead leaves. I suddenly felt extremely unhappy. Further on, in the darkness, the dogs were barking very loudly. I got up and started off again, cursing the Commandant, who had never thought of switching on his torch. I cursed him mechanically as I ran, somewhat as one clings to a minor grievance, nursing it interminably, in some dream-adventure when one is carried away by an obscure, mighty impetus, fulfilling a strange

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destiny and meanwhile with senile fretfulness clutching at the carved pommel of the saddle.

Now I was running behind the Commandant, concerned only with catching him up and humbly asking him to light my way, for if he abandoned me there would only be night and silence and nothing would have any meaning. I was breathless.

‘Wait for me, wait for me, sir!’ I shouted.

‘Come on, we’re there!’

Our jerky utterances, our frantic pace gave the whole thing a lunatic rhythm, so that if we had emerged from the wood into the moonlight foaming at the lips like wild horses, amidst general astonishment, it would have been quite in keeping with the spirit of that moment. Fortunately the wood still hid us; it seemed to be wide enough. A branch whipped me in the face; I felt like weeping, and I began to run again. The dogs had stopped barking; then they began to howl.

‘Stop!’ the Commandant shouted to me.

He was beside me, motionless, panting.

‘The bastard! He’d climbed up a tree. The dogs smelt him out but he had his pockets full of stones which he threw at them so that he could climb down. When he was on the ground he drove off the dogs with his cudgel and then escaped. That’s why we had to run for so long. Now he’s surrounded, he’s done for. Oh, what’s happening?’

In front of us was a dog howling with pain and running off through the wood. The Commandant, who had got back his breath, dashed to the place where Franz was fighting. From time to time we could hear the dogs yelling with rage. Another of them, who had been wounded, stood still, whining desperately. At intervals I could hear the sound of the blows Franz was showering on his assailants, like the whirr of a flail. A big stone rolled among the bushes and again a dog began to howl with pain.

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'Give in, Franz! Stop hitting my animals!' cried the Commandant, going still nearer and switching on his torch. 'D'you hear, Franz? It's an order this time, give in!'

The dogs were so wild that the Commandant dared go no nearer. He turned to me with a helpless gesture: 'He's destroying my hounds! What's possessing him tonight? . . . Franz,' he shouted again, 'for God's sake, this has gone on long enough! Let yourself be caught and they'll calm down. D'you hear me? The exercise is over! If you don't give in . . .'

Franz made no answer. The dogs were baying, growling, howling with pain, growing wild with excitement and rushing in to meet his blows; and we heard the ceaseless flail-like sound of his cudgel and the rattling of the stones that every now and then he hurled at his attackers and that came rolling through the bushes to our feet.

'The leaders have got left behind, they've lost their way, as we might have expected!' cried the Commandant, swivelling round anxiously. 'They're a useless gang! And this lunatic's murdering my dogs! He won't even answer. You talk to him, since you seem to be a friend of his. You never know . . .'

No, you never knew. And you would never know. I took one step forward: 'Franz!' I shouted. 'The Commandant's quite right. Stop hitting them.'

Franz burst out laughing. 'What are you doing there?' he said.

He was about to come down from the bank on which he was standing when the dogs, taking advantage of the lull, pounced on him with a roar and clung to his padded garment.

'I can't move!' cried Franz joyfully. 'Where are the masters?'

'They're coming,' replied the Commandant, who had calmed down. He turned towards the depths of the wood and began to rally his men with shouts. Franz stood on his bank,

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firmly anchored by the dogs. I took a step towards him. He heard me coming: 'Don't come here,' he shouted to me, 'they're quite capable of turning against you. Well, did you find the demonstration interesting?'

I was close enough to him to answer without having to raise my voice excessively. 'Tremendously interesting, Franz. I'm happy to see that you've found a way out at last. Isn't your present attitude the solution of the problem that we were discussing last night?'

The Commandant came up to us. The leaders, scattered through the forest, had answered his call and were about to join us.

'You've scored this evening, Franz,' said the Commandant. 'You've proved your strength, but don't think I acknowledge myself definitely defeated. We'll meet again soon, my friend.'

'I hope so, sir,' replied Franz.

The men were close to us; they called their dogs, who let go of their prey, and fastened them on their leashes.

'Come on,' said the Commandant, 'the guests are waiting for us.'

Franz had climbed down from his bank and was walking a few yards away from us. I dared not speak to him in the presence of the Commandant. After a few minutes, the Commandant asked me to pause and let Franz pass us. I obeyed. Franz disappeared into the forest, treading heavily, not like a man who is weighed down and crushed but rather like some primitive being of unusual stature and bulk, burdened with mankind's first responsibilities, who passes through an immense forest on the further edge of which he will see one of the first dawns of the world.

I left next day without having seen him again.

A few months later I received, at the Ministry, a card of greeting bearing Franz's signature. He was still at Appen-

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weier; he was still in charge of the dogs. The text of his message was brief and extremely banal. However, I noticed that Franz had twice misspelt the word 'hounds' as 'huonds'.\*

I did not for one moment believe this was a mistake. I still think, today, that it was not by pure accident, carelessness or a slip of the pen that the key word of this story had become dangerously transfigured into a sort of outlandish syllable, a strange unpolished pebble rolling along in the bed of words more slowly than the rest. Fate, which had watched over its metamorphosis (the most economical possible, consisting merely of the inversion of two letters), was still present in this confrontation of man and beast.

At any moment, the beast's nature can change: we are at the frontier. The horse can be mad, the sheep rabid, the rat cunning, the bear ruthless: secondary states which give us a glimpse into an animal hell, and in which we recognize, with an astonished sense of kinship, our own tortured likeness, as in a scratched mirror.

\* French: chiens—ch<sup>ens</sup>.

## *The Season of the Dead*

Dead though they be, the dead do not immediately become ageless. Theirs is not the only memory involved; they enter into a seasonal cycle, with an unfamiliar rhythm—ternary perhaps, slow in any case, with widely spaced oscillations and pauses; they hang for a while nailed to a great wheel, sinking and rising by turns; they have become, far beyond the horizons of memory, rays of a skeleton sun.

We had reached the first stage. We were opening up the graveyard—in the sense in which one speaks of opening up a trench; in this place, there had only been life before there was death. And this freshness was to persist for a long time, before the teeming dust of the charnel should dim it, before, eventually, when all the earth was trodden down, oblivion should spread with couch-grass and darnel, and the writing on the tombstones should have lost its meaning; and the arable land should regain what we had taken from it.

For a graveyard to become a real graveyard, many dead must be buried there, many years must pass, many feet must tread on it; the dead, in short, must make the ground their own. We were certainly far from that point. Our dead would be war dead, for whom we had to break open a grassy mound. It was all, in short, brimful of newness.

War dead. The formula had lost its heroic sense without becoming obsolete. The war had lately moved away from this spot. These men would die a belated and, as it were, accidental death, in silence and captivity, yielding up their arms for a second time. But could one still use the word 'arms'?

From the slope of the mound where the new graveyard lay I could see them walking round and round within the barbed



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wire enclosure of the camp, looking less like soldiers than like people of every sort and condition brought together by their common look of sleeplessness, their unshaven cheeks and the cynical complicity of gangsters the morning after a raid. Following several abortive escapes through Germany, some thousand French soldiers had just been transferred to the disciplinary camp of Brodno in Volynia. It was a second captivity for them, a new imprisonment that was more bewilderingly outlandish and also more romantic. That word gives us a clue: it was an imprisonment for death.

I had been granted the title of gravedigger in advance of the functions. When you dig a ditch, it's because you have already found water. Just now there was nothing of that sort. The ditch we were digging was too long to have a tree planted in it, too deep to be one of those individual holes in which, at that time, throughout Europe, men in helmets were burrowing, forming the base of a monolithic monument which was hard to imagine, particularly here. It could only be a grave. Now we strengthened it with props, we covered it with planks. Nobody was dead. The grave was becoming a sort of snare, a trap in which Fate would finally be caught, into which a dead man would eventually creep. He would thus have been forestalled and would glide into the darkness through wide open doors, while we would shrink back as he passed, hiding our earth-stained hands behind our backs.

The German N.C.O. had rounded us up in the camp. He needed six men. When he had got that number he took us to the gate and handed us over to an armed sentry. We skirted the wall outside the camp until we came to a small rough road which, a little further on, led over the side of a hill. At this point a track took us to the verge of the forest. The N.C.O., riding a bicycle, had caught up with us. He went to cut a few switches from an elm-tree.

'Who knows German?' he asked without turning round.

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'I do.'

He called me to him. He was trimming the leaves from the switches with vigorous strokes of his penknife. I disliked the sight: swift-working fingers, pursed lips, and at the end of the supple, swaying branch a ridiculous tuft of leaves dancing as though before an imminent storm. There is no wretchedness like that of flogged men.

'There's to be a graveyard here,' he said to me, suddenly handing me the trimmed branches. 'Your own. Follow me and tell your mates to pull off some more branches.'

I passed on the order and followed the N.C.O. to a place where the skirt of the wood dipped down into a narrow combe at the end of which lay a round pond like a hand-mirror. The German dug the heel of his boot into the grass: 'Here.' As carefully as a gardener I planted a branch at the spot he showed me. Then he straightened his back and made a half-turn; staring straight in front of him, he walked forward, stopped and dug his heel into the grass, started off again and stopped again. My companions came up with their arms loaded with leafy branches. The task of planting began, and soon the branches stood lined up there in the still morning, marking the footsteps of the man as he doggedly staked his theoretical claim.

When the enclosure was thus demarcated, the German called me. We had to mark the site of the first grave. When this was set out my companions, in a fit of zeal, immediately began to lift up clods of turf. Then the earth suddenly appeared as it really was; it lay there against the grass like a garment ready to be put on.

'That's enough, you can dig it tomorrow,' the German told us. 'We must always have one ready. Death comes quickly these days. War's a shocking thing.'

He collected us together and the sentry took us back to the camp. As we were going through the gate one of us got

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from him, after some pleading, a leaf from his note-book with his signature. We rushed to the kitchens where extra rations of soup were sometimes distributed to the men who were working in gangs about the camp.

'Graveyard!' cried the prisoner who held the voucher, waving it. The man with the soup-ladle looked at us uncertainly for a moment, as though trying to remember to what burial-ground this irregular privilege could suddenly have been allotted.

'Camp graveyard!' someone else repeated. The man took the can that was held out to him and filled it. Death had spoken; moreover, Death's voucher was in order.

From that day, and still more from the following day when the first grave had been dug and shored up, I began to look out for Death in the faces of my comrades, in the weight of the hour, the colour of the sky, the lines of the landscape. Here, the great spaces of Russia were already suggested; I had never known a sky under which one had such a sense of surrender.

Sometimes the earth, dried by the early spring sunshine, was blown so high by the wind that the horizon was darkened by a brown cloud, a storm-cloud which would break up into impalpable dust, and under which the sunflowers glowed so luminously and appeared suddenly at such distances that you felt you were witnessing the brief, noisy revenge of a whole nation of pensive plants, condemned for the rest of their days to the dull quietness of sunshine.

Close to us, the town was shut in with a white wall above which rose a bulbous church spire, some roofs, and the white plume of smoke from a train, rising for a long time in the same spot, with a far-off whistle like a slaughtered factory.

We had reached Brodno one April morning. The melting snows and the rain had washed away so much earth from the

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unpaved streets that planks and duckboards had been thrown down everywhere to let people cross, haphazard and usually crooked, looking like wreckage left after a flood subsides. The sentries could no longer keep the column in order and we were all running from one plank to another mingled with women wearing scarves on their heads and boots on their feet, with German soldiers, with men in threadbare caftans; and here and there jostling one of those strange villagers who stood motionless with rigid faces, their feet in the mud, idle as mourners, with white armlets on their arms as though in some plague-stricken city.

It might have been market-day, and the animation in the main street of the village might have been merely the good-humoured bustle of the population between a couple of showers, such as one sees also on certain snowy mornings, or on the eve of a holiday. . . . In any case, that first day, the star of David, drawn in blue ink on the armlets of those painfully deferential villagers who looked oddly Sundayfied in their dark threadbare town clothes amongst that crowd of peasants, seemed to me a symbol of penitence, somewhat mitigated, however, by its traditional character.

It was not until later on that their destiny was clearly revealed to me. Then, when I saw them in a group away from the crowd, they ceased to be mere landmarks; exposed to solitude as to a fire, that which had been diluted among so many and had passed almost unnoticed acquired sudden solidity. All at once, they became the mourners at a Passion: a procession of tortured victims, a mute delegation about to appeal to God.

A certain number of Jews had been detailed by the Germans to get the camp ready before our arrival. When we entered the gates they were still there, carefully putting the last touches to the fences, finishing the installation of our sordid equipment, and thus implacably imprisoning

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themselves, by virtue of some premonitory knowledge, within a universe with which they were soon to become wholly familiar.

The camp consisted of cavalry barracks built by the Red Army shortly after the occupation of Eastern Poland at the end of . A huge bare space separated the three large brick-built main buildings from the whitewashed stables which housed the overflow of our column, according to that mode of military occupation that disdains all hierarchy of places—thus identifying itself with the bursting of dams, the blind and inexorable progress of disasters.

Inside every building, whether stable or barracks, wooden platforms, superimposed on one another, had been set up the whole length of the huge rooms, leaving only a narrow passage along the walls and another across the middle of the structure: tiered bunks like shelves in a department store, where the men were to sleep side by side. Our captivity thus disclosed that homicidal trend which (for practical rather than moral reasons) it usually refused to admit: for the Germans, the unit of spatial measurement was 'a man's length'.

The great typhus season was barely over at Brodno. It had decimated the thousands of Russian prisoners who had occupied the place before us and who had left their marks on the whitewashed walls—the print of abnormally filthy hands, bloodstains and splashed excrement—messages from those immured men jostling one another in the silent winter night, while Death and Frost exchanged rings: faintly-heard calls from far away. Because of the lingering typhus and the risk of propagating lice, we were given no straw.

We were given little of anything that first day. The Germans, except for a few sentries established in their watch-towers, had retired no one knew whither, as though it were understood that at the end of our trying journey we must be granted a day's truce, an unwonted Sunday that found us

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standing helpless, leaning against the typhus-ridden bunks with our meagre bundles at our feet. A louse crawled up one's spine like a drop of sweat running the wrong way, and within one there was that great echoing vault, hunger.

In the afternoon, however, a few dixies full of soup were thrust through the kitchen door. A thousand men lined up on the path of planks that led to it. Hardly any of us had a mess-tin, but a great rubbish-dump full of empty food-tins supplied our needs. When the tins were all used up we unscrewed the clouded glass globes covering the electric lamps in the building, and made empty flower-pots water-tight by plugging the holes with bits of wood. When these uncouth vessels appeared in the queue they were greeted with shouts of envy, provoked rather by their capacity than by their grotesque character. A sort of carnival procession in search of soup took place, and the owner of an empty sardine-tin might be seen gauging a piece of hollow brick half-buried in the mud, wondering if those four holes like organ-pipes might perhaps be stopped up at the base, and turning over the problem with his foot while the column moved on a few yards. Fine rain was falling.

'It's millet!' shouted a man coming towards us from the kitchens, clasping his brimming tin in both hands.

A cry of joy, in an unknown voice: a fragmentary phrase, as though cut out of its context, which, uttered in the dying afternoon in the heart of the Volynian plain, seemed to have escaped from a speech begun very far away, many years earlier, and to have returned now—just as, in the hour of death, words half-heard long ago, neglected then and despised, recur to one's memory, suddenly whispering out their plaintive revenge, suddenly gleaming with a prodigious sheen because they hold the last drops of life.

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### II

It was not until much later that somebody died.

From the time of that first burial I felt certain that death would never move far from our threshold. A dead body is never buried as deep as one thinks; when a grave is dug, each blow of the pickaxe consolidates the boundaries of the underground world. Though you lie sepulchred in the earth, like a vessel sunk in quicksands, and the waves of darkness beat against you from below, your bones remain like an anchor cast.

That day a group of German soldiers accompanied the convoy. They were armed and helmeted. They fell into step with the handful of Frenchmen—the chaplain, the medical orderly, the '*homme de confiance*'\*—who were walking behind the *tarantass* on which the coffin was laid. They moved very fast and they seemed to be upon us in a few minutes, as we stood watching from the graveyard on the side of the hill (had they remembered to bring the cross and the ropes?); they were charging on us, a crowd of them, two by two, clad from head to foot; they were coming for us, making us realize in a flash what a terrible responsibility we had accepted when we dug that hole, what echoes our solitary toil had roused over there.

We had to face them, to lay the ropes down side by side on the spot where the coffin would be placed, to put down the two logs at the bottom of the grave on which it would lie so that we might afterwards haul up the cords, the ends of which would flap against the coffin for a minute like the pattering footsteps of a last animal escaping. The chaplain recited prayers. The medical orderly sounded the Last Post on a bugle, picked up somewhere or other. We grasped our ropes

\* One of the French prisoners chosen by the rest to represent their interests in dealing with the Germans.

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and, leaning over the grave, began to slacken them. At an order from their N.C.O. the German soldiers, who were presenting arms, raised the barrels of their guns towards the sky and fired a salvo.

There is always somebody there behind the target of silence. A shout or a word uttered too loud or too soon, and you hear a distant bush crying out with a human voice—you run towards a sort of dark animal only to see it clasp a white, human hand to its bleeding side; it's the tragedy of those hunting accidents where the victims, emerging from silence, are the friend or stranger—equally innocent—who happened to be passing by; there's always somebody passing just there, and we are never sufficiently aware of it.

The Germans' salvo re-echoed for a long time. We had lifted our heads again. Lower down, on the little road, some peasants and their women, coming back from the town, who had not witnessed the beginning of the ceremony (at that distance, in any case, they could not have observed its details) began to walk suddenly faster, casting a quick look back at us. Some women drew closer together and took each other's arms, a man stumbled in his haste, and all of them swiftly bowed their heads and refused to look at what was happening in our direction.

They seemed possessed not so much by anxiety as by a kind of shuddering anticipation, making them shun a spectacle which they dreaded as though it were contagious and hurry slightly despite their assumed indifference. They betrayed that tendency to deliberate withdrawal which, at that time, was making the whole region more deserted than any exodus could have done. Had we run towards them, clasped their hands, gazed into their faces crying 'It's all right, we're alive!' they would no doubt still have turned away from us, terrified by fresh suspicions, feeling themselves irremediably compromised. . . . Now they had vanished. The Germans slung



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their rifles. We stood upright round the grave, like a row of shot puppets.

This incident and others less remarkable gave us a feeling of solidarity. We tried to secure official recognition for our team from the camp authorities by presenting a list of our names to every new sentry—to those that kept guard over the gates, those that supervised the kitchens, those that inspected our block. Every week we made out several lists, in case the camp administration should prove forgetful. We gave notice of our existence to remoter authorities, to prisoners' representatives, shock brigade headquarters, divisional commanders, with the stubborn persistence of minorities ceaselessly tormented by the nightmare of illegality.

We guessed that our proceedings met with secret opposition from the Germans, who were unwilling to give public recognition to this peculiar team, the granting of legal status to which would for them have been equivalent to admitting criminal premeditation—and from the prisoners too, since they did not need so realistic a reminder of the gruesome truth.

Between two deaths, it was only owing to the force of habit and the routinist mentality of the guardroom officer that we found a couple of sentries waiting each morning to take us to the graveyard. This, lying on the side of the hill amongst long grass, was in such sharp contrast to the almost African aridity of the camp as to enhance the feeling of separateness and even of exclusion which the failure of our advances to the administration had fostered in us. We belonged to another world, we were a team of ghosts returning every morning to a green peaceful place, we were workers in Death's garden, characters in a long preparatory dream through which, from time to time, a man would suddenly break, leaping into his last sleep.

In the graveyard we led that orderly existence depicted in old paintings and, even more, in old tapestries and mosaics.

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A man sitting beside a clump of anemones, another cutting grass with a scythe; water, and somebody lying flat on his belly drinking, and somebody else with his eyes turned skyward, drawing water in a yellow jug. . . . The water was for me and Cordonat. We had chosen the job of watering the flowers and turf transplanted on to the first grave and amongst the clumps of shrubs that we had arranged within our enclosure.

Its boundaries were imaginary but real enough. We had no need to step outside them to fill our vessels at the pond which, from the graveside, could be seen between the branches, a little lower down; there, the radiance of the sky reflected in the water enfolded us so vividly, lit up both our faces so clearly, that any thought of flight could have been read on them from a distance, before we had made the slightest movement, before—risking everything to win everything—we had set the light quivering, like bells.

The only flight left to us was the flight of our eyes towards the wooded valley at the end of which the pond lay. The leaves and grass and tree-trunks glowed in the shadow, through which sunbeams filtered and in which, far off, a single leaf, lit by the sun's direct fire, gleamed transparently, an evanescent landmark whose mysterious significance faded quickly as a cloud appeared.

Flowers grew at the very brink of the pond, violets, buttercups, dwarf forget-me-nots, reviving memories of old herbals; only the lady-bird's carapace and the red umbrella of the toadstool were lacking to link up the springtime of the world with one's own childhood. When we had filled our bottles, Cordonat and I would linger there gazing at our surroundings, moved by our memories, and in an impulse of greedy sentimentality guessing at the beech-nut under the beech-leaf, the young acorn under the oak-leaf, the mushroom under the toadstool and the snail under the moss.

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Sometimes the sun hid. But we could not stir, for we had fallen down out of our dream to such a depth that our task—watering a few clumps of wood-sorrel in a remote corner of Volynia—appeared absurd to the point of unreality, like some Purgatorial penance where the victims, expiating their own guilt or original sin, are forced to draw unending pails of water from a bottomless well, in a green landscape, tending Death like a dwarf tree—just as we were doing here.

Actually, I did not know whether Cordonat's dream followed the same lines as my own. I had lately grown very fond of Cordonat, but he was so deeply consumed by nostalgia that maybe I only loved the shadow of the man. He was ten years older than I, married, with two children; home consists of what you miss most. This vineyard worker from Languedoc showed his Catalan ancestry in his lean, tanned face, with the look of an old torero relegated to the rear rank of a *cuadrilla*, his delicate aquiline nose and wrinkled forehead with white hair over the temples which predestined him for the loneliness of captivity.

It so happened that, with the exception of myself, all the men of our graveyard team, who belonged to the most recent call-up, were natives of the South of France, and all showed a tendency to nostalgic melancholy which was highly appropriate not only to their new duties but to our peculiar isolation on the fringe of camp life. This distinction enhanced a characteristic which was common to all the prisoners of Brodno, who, by their repeated attempts to escape from Germany, had in effect escaped from their own kind. At a time when under cover of captivity countless acts of treachery were taking place, they had set up on the Ukrainian border, in a corner of Europe where the rules of war were easily forgotten, a defiant Resistance movement, a group of 'desert rats' whose most seditious song was the Marseillaise.

Homesickness creates its own mirages, which can supersede

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many a landscape. But that amidst which we were living now was becoming so cruelly vivid that it pierced through all illusory images; it underlay my companions' dreams like a sharp-pointed harrow. This only became clear by slow degrees.

When Cordonat and I were sitting by the pond, we would look up and see peasants and their wives on their way back from the town, passing along the path through the trees and bushes at the end of our combe. We would stand up to see them better and immediately they would hurry on and vanish from sight, imperceptibly accentuating the furtiveness of their way of walking, stooping a little and averting their eyes as though they were eager to avoid the sight of something unlucky or, more precisely, something compromising.

As we stood at the foot of this hillock, somewhat apart from the other prisoners, we must have seemed to be in one of those irregular situations which were not uncommon here, like cases of some infectious disease. Were we escaped prisoners, obdurate rebels? Were we in quarantine, or about to be shot? In any case we were obviously trying to make them our accomplices, determined to betray them into a word or a look and thus involve them in that contamination that always ended with a shower of bullets and blood splashed against a wall. And the forest in which, only a minute before, spring flowers had awakened childhood memories, now emerged as though from some Hercynian flexure, darker and denser, more mysterious and more ominous, because of the fear and hunger of men. Fear can blast reality.

But it was when we left the skirt of the forest and reached the plain where the town lay that this devastating power of fear seemed actually to colour the whole landscape. The white road, the far-off white house fronts, the lack of shadows, all this was deprived of radiance by the subdued quality of the light; but it exuded a kind of stupor. At first, you noticed nothing.

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But when we drew near we would suddenly catch sight of a man or a woman standing motionless between two houses or two hedges, and turning towards us in an attitude of submission, like people who have been warned to prepare for any danger. The man or woman would stare at us as we passed with eyes that revealed neither curiosity nor envy nor dread: a gaze that was not dreamy, but enigmatically watchful. A few men, also dressed in threadbare town clothes, were filling up the holes in the pavement. They did not raise their heads as we went by; they kept on with their work, but performed only secondary, inessential tasks, like factory hands waiting for the bell to release them from work and only staying at their posts because they have to.

In every case we were aware that, as we approached (or more precisely as our sentries approached), some final inner process of preparation was taking place (but maybe it had long since been completed?) and that one of the Germans had only to say 'Come on!', load his gun or raise the butt to strike, for everything to take its inevitable, unaltering course. The tension of waiting was extreme.

They had long ago passed the stage when your pulse beats faster, spots dance before your eyes and sweat breaks out on your back; they had not left fear behind, but they had been married to it for so long that it had lost its original power. Fear shared their lives, and when we walked past with our sentries beside us it was Fear, that tireless companion, that began, in a burst of lunatic lucidity, to count the pebbles dropping into the hole in the pavement, the trees along the road, or the days dividing that instant from some past event or other—the fête at Tarnopol, or Easter, or the day little Chaim passed his exam: some other spring day, some dateless day, some distant day that seemed to collect and hold all the happiness in life.

Sometimes, in the depth of their night, fear would flare up

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and wake them, like the suddenly remembered passion that throws husband and wife into each other's arms; then they would embrace their fear, foreseeing the coming of their death like the birth of a child, and their thoughts would set out in the next room the oblong covered cradle in which it would be laid. Morning would bring back their long lonely wait, *tête à tête* with fear. They tied round their arms the strip of white material with the star of David drawn on it. Often the armlet slipped down below the elbow, and hung round the forearm slack and rumpled and soiled like an old dressing that has grown loose and needs renewing. The wound is unhealed, but dry. But why should I speak of wounds? Hunger, cold, humiliation and fear leave corpses without stigmata. One morning we saw a man lying dead by the roadside on the way to the graveyard. There was no face; it was hidden in the grass. There was no distinguishing mark, save the armlet with the star of David. There was no blood. There is practically no blood in the whole of this tale of death.

### III

One Monday morning two new sentries came up to join us at the camp gates. They belonged to a nondescript battalion in shabby uniforms which had been sent from somewhere in Poland by way of relief, and had arrived at Brodno a few days earlier: one of those nomadic divisions to which only inglorious duties are assigned, and whose soldiers only get killed in defeats.

Our two new sentries were a perfect example of the contrasts, exaggerated to the point of grotesqueness, which are always to be found among any group of belatedly conscripted men, since neither regulation dress nor *esprit de corps* nor conviction can replace the uniformity of youth. One of the

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two soldiers was long and thin, with a high-coloured face; the other, short and squat, was pale.

Each morning, when we went into the enclosure, we would quickly dismiss and, one after the other, go and stand before the graves giving a military salute; it was the only solemn moment of the day. That morning, as I was walking after my comrades to pay my homage to the dead, I heard a click behind me: the taller of the two soldiers was loading his gun. We had been running rather quickly towards our dead, because it was Monday and we felt lively. He had been afraid we were trying to escape or mutiny. But we were merely hurrying towards the graves like workmen to the factory cloakroom, discarding discipline and, at the same time, hanging up our jackets on the crosses.

There were only three graves at this time. We made up for this by working on the flower-beds, those other plots of consecrated, cultivated ground. Cordonat and I were already grasping our bottles, eager to resume our reveries beside the pond, at the bottom of which could be seen a rifle and a hand-grenade thrown there by a fugitive Russian soldier. This filthy panoply, sunk deep in the mud, mingled with our reflected images when we bent over the water, as though we had not been haunted enough for the past two years by the memory of our discarded arms.

I went up to the short German soldier (the other had alarmed me by that performance with his rifle a little while before) and explained to him that it was our custom to go and draw water from the pond. He nodded, smiling but silent; then, before I went off, he said to me in French: '*Je suis curé.*'

The word, uttered with an accent that was in itself slightly ridiculous, had a kind of popular simplicity that, far from conferring any grandeur on it, seemed to relegate it to the vocabulary of anti-clericalism, made it sound like the admission of a comic anomaly. Such a statement, made by this

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embarrassed little man wearing a dreaded uniform in the depth of that nameless country, suggested the depressing exhibitionism of hermaphrodites, the sudden surprise of their disclosure. I could find nothing to reply.

'Protestant,' he went on in his own language. 'In France, you're mostly Catholics.'

So he was a pastor. The rights of reason were restored—so were those of the field-grey uniform, since I found it easier to associate the Protestant religion with the military profession. I acquiesced: we were, apparently, Catholics. Generously, the Germans granted us this valid historical qualification; we might graze on this reprieve. The little pastor, however, did not try to stop us from going to draw water for our flowers; he encouraged us to do so and walked along with us down the path leading to the pond.

Without giving me time to answer, he chattered in his own language, of which Cordonat understood barely a word. I had never before heard German spoken so volubly; it poured forth like a long-repressed confession, like a flood breaking the old barriers of prejudice and rationalism, and the clear waters rushed freely over me, carrying the harsh syllables like loose pebbles. He was a pastor at Marburg. His family came from the Rhineland and one of his ancestors was French. In the Rhineland they grew vines; the country was beautiful there. Marburg lay further east; and there they still remembered Schiller and Goethe and Lessing (nowadays people seldom talk about Lessing). The pastor's wife was an invalid. On summer evenings he would go into the town cafés with his elder daughter. They were often taken for man and wife.

He went on talking. It was a sunny June morning. The Ukrainian wheat was springing up. By the side of the sandy roads, you could sometimes see sunflower blossoms thrown away by travellers after eating the seeds. And we carried on our Franco-Rhenish colloquy, squatting at the foot of the



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hillock, beside the pond, in the shade of the trees, while the peasant women, suspecting some fresh conflict, some subtle and wordy form of bullying, hurriedly passed by higher up, with a rustle of leaves under their bare feet.

In order to keep our hands occupied and to justify our long halt by the pond in the eyes of the other sentry, Cordonat and I had begun to scour our mess-tins. We always carried them about with us. I had fixed a small wire handle to mine so as to hook it to my belt. This habit was partly due to the constant hope of some windfall, some unexpected distribution of food, but also no doubt it expressed a sort of fetishistic attachment to the object that symbolized our age's exclusive concern with the search for food. These mess-tins, which had only been handed out to us on our second day in camp, were like little zinc bowls; we went about with barbers' basins hanging from our waists. As part of this instinctive cult, we felt bound to polish them scrupulously. Cordonat and I were particular about this, to the point of mania. It was largely because of the fine sand on the edge of the pond and also because we were waiting—waiting for better days to come.

'*Ydiom! Ydiom!*' (come on!) we heard a peasant woman on the hill above us calling to one of her companions, who must have been lingering in the exposed zone.

The little pastor kept on talking.

'What d'you think of all this?' I asked him.

'It's terrible,' he said. 'Yes, what's happening here is terrible.'

That simple word assumed the value of confession, of a dangerous secret shared. It was enough in those days (a look, a gesture, a change of expression would have been enough) to lift the hostile mask and reveal the pact beneath. However, I dared not venture further and I began pleading our cause, describing our destitution, making no major charge but only such obvious complaints as could give no serious offence to

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the Germans. The petty sufferings we endured acted as a convenient salve for one's conscience; I realized this as I spoke and I resented it. Even this graveyard, so sparsely populated and so lavishly decorated, had begun to look like 'a nice place for a picnic', with its green turf overlying the great banqueting-halls of Death.

'Terrible, terrible,' the little pastor kept saying. It was the word he had used earlier. But it had lost its original beauty.

### IV

Back in camp, after the midday meal of soup, I waited impatiently for the two sentries to come and take us to the graveyard. I looked forward to seeing Ernst, the pastor (he had told me his name), with a feeling of mingled sympathy and curiosity that was practically friendship; it only needed to be called so.

I was not surprised when, on reaching the graveyard, Ernst took me into the forest, explaining to his mate that we were going to look for violet plants. It was high time, the last violets were fading. The other German appeared quite satisfied with this explanation. Since the morning, he had been so good-humoured that I felt inclined to think that that sudden business with the rifle had been an automatic gesture; a gun never lets your hands stay idle. He had a long shrewd face.

'I'm a Socialist,' he told my friends while I walked away with Ernst.

Cordonat watched me go; was he envying me or disowning me? He sat there beside the pond like some lonely mythological figure.

But now the forest was opening up in front of me: that forest which hitherto I had known only in imagination, which had existed for me by virtue not of its copious foliage or its stalwart tree-trunks but of its contrasting gloom, the power-

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ful way it shouldered the horizon and above all its secret contribution to the darkness that weighed me down. We walked on amidst serried plants; he carried his rifle in its sling, looking less like an armed soldier than like a tired huntsman, glad to have picked up a companion along the homeward road. But already the forest and its dangerous shadows had begun to suggest that the journey home would be an endless one, that our companionship was forever; once more, in the midst of a primeval forest, we were shackled together like those countless lonely damned couples—the prisoner and his guard, the body and its conscience, the hound and its prey, the wound and the knife, oneself and one's shadow.

'Well, when you're not too hungry in camp, what d'you like doing? You must have some sort of leisure. Oh, I know you don't like that word. But I don't know any other way to express the situation where I'd hope to find your real self—for hunger isn't really you, Peter. Well, what else is there?'

He pushed back from his hip the butt of his rifle, which kept swinging between us.

'I walk round the camp beside the barbed wire, or else I sleep, and when I find a book I read it. . . .'

'And sometimes you write, too. . . .'

I looked at Ernst suspiciously.

'A few days ago,' he went on, 'I was on guard in one of the watch-towers. I noticed you. You stopped to write something in a little note-book. This morning I recognized you at once.'

This disclosure irritated me.

'You see, I can't even be alone!' I cried. 'Isn't that inhuman?'

'But you were alone. You were alone because at that moment I didn't know you, and you didn't know me. Really, nothing was happening at all.'

He was beginning to sound a little too self-confident. It was a tone that did not seem natural to him; there was a sort of

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strained excitement about it. I did not pursue the matter; without answering I bent down to pick up my violet plants. Ernst stood in silence for a while then, returning to the words I had spoken a few minutes earlier, as though his mind had dwelt on them in spite of what had followed:

'Books,' he repeated with a schoolmasterish air of satisfaction and longing. 'They were my great refuge too, when I spent a few months in a concentration camp two years ago. I'd been appointed librarian, thank Heaven. . . . Look here,' he went on in a livelier tone, as though what had been said previously was of no importance, 'put down your violet plants. Come and I'll show you something.'

He was giving me line enough, as fishermen say; but I was well and truly caught this time. I stood up. He had started off ahead of me along a path that led to the right. I caught up with him: 'I suppose the camp was on account of your political ideas?'

'Political . . . well, that's a word we don't much care for. Rather on account of my moral views. However, they did let me out of that camp. It was just a warning. I need hardly tell you that I haven't changed. . . . You see that wall?'

I saw the wall. It was decrepit, overgrown with moss and briars, its stones falling apart, and it enclosed a space in which the forest seemed to go on, to judge by the tree-tops that appeared above it. We walked some way round the outside and came to a gap in the wall. Within the enclosure grey stones stood among trees which were slighter than those of the surrounding forest, contrary to my previous impression. Here and there, pale grass was growing; it had begun to take possession of the ground again. The upright stones marked Jewish graves, a hundred years old no doubt. Eastern religions lay their dead at the foot of slabs of slate, stumbling-blocks for the encroaching wilderness. Time had jostled many and overthrown a few of these old battlements of death, mono-

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liths on which Heaven had written its reckoning in the only tongue it has ever spoken.

Ernst knew a little Hebrew. His small plump hand was soon moving over the stone, beginning on the right as in fortune-telling by cards. He read out some long-distant date, lazily coiled up now with a caterpillar of moss lying in the concavity of the figures, some name, with the knowledgeable curiosity of an accountant who has discovered old statements, bills yellow with age that have been settled once and for all. His religion was based on the belief that death belongs to the past and, when he looked at a grave, whether worn down by time or black with leaf-mould, he would say to himself with visible gladness that 'all that's over and done with'. Meanwhile I was overwhelmed by the symbolism of these graves; on most of the stones there was carved a breaking branch—you could see the sharp points at the break and the two fragments about to separate forming an angle, a gaping angle like an elbow. It was like the sudden rending that takes place high up in the tree of life, its imminence revealed by the flight of a bird, of that other soul which has hitherto deafened us by its ceaseless twittering, whereas our real life lay in the roots. On the stone, the branch was endlessly breaking, it would never break; when death has come, has one finished dying? Ernst raised his head and straightened his back.

'I've been re-reading your classics,' he said to me with a smile.

I did not understand.

'I mean that this ancient, traditional burial ground, close by your own fresh and improvised one, is rather like the upper shelf in a library. . . .' He laid his hand on a carved stone. 'The preceding words in the great book . . .'

'Who can tell? Perhaps the moment of death is never over,' I replied, thinking of the symbol of the broken branch. 'Perhaps we are doomed to a perpetual leave-taking from that

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which was life and which lies in the depth of night, as eternal as the patient stars. Perhaps there is no more identity in death than in life. Each man dies in his own corner, each man stays dead in his own corner, alone and friendless. Every death invents death anew.'

'But I believe in Heaven and in the communities of Heaven, where no echo of life is heard,' replied Ernst joyfully. 'In the peace of the Lord.'

'I cannot and will not believe that those who are murdered here cease their cries the moment after. . . .'

'Their cries have been heard before,' said Ernst. 'What do you mean? Do you need to hear dead men's cries? Isn't it enough that God remembers them, that we remember them? I will tell you something: they are sleeping peacefully in the light, all in the same light.'

'That's too easy an answer!' I cried. 'That's just to make us feel at peace.'

'Don't torture yourself,' Ernst replied. 'In any case, neither you nor I is to blame.'

We were not to blame. I had taken up my violets again from the place where I had left them a short while before and, with this badge of innocence, my flowers refuting what Ernst's rifle might suggest, we made our way to the graveyard through the silent forest.

'Tomorrow we'll go for another walk,' Ernst said. 'We might take the others too. We'll find some pretext.'

### v

But next day we were deprived of any pretext. Two men had died in the camp. Graves had to be dug; the dead had to be buried.

Ernst directed our labours skilfully and with pensive dignity. It was he who taught us that in this part of Europe they

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lined the inside of graves with fir-branches. Not to lag behind in the matter of symbolism we decided to bury the dead facing towards France. As France happened to be on the further side of the forest against which the first row of graves had been dug, we were obliged to lay the dead men the wrong way round, with their feet under the crosses.

These two deaths occurring simultaneously aroused our anxiety. Sanitary conditions within the camp had worsened; underfed and weakened by their sufferings during the escape and the subsequent journeys from camp to camp, the men gathered in daily increasing numbers in a huge sickroom. A few French doctors had been sent to Brodno by way of reprisal; lacking any sort of medicaments, they went from one palliasse to the next making useless diagnoses, reduced to the passive role of witnesses in this overcrowded world whose rhythm was the gallop of feverish pulses and where delirious ravings mingled in a crazy arabesque, while men sat coughing their lungs out.

We buried four men in the same week. June was nearly over; it was already summer. By now, the white roads of the invasion spread like a network over the Russian land, far east of Brodno, right up to the Don, then to the Volga, to the Kuban, milestoned with poisoned wells. The woods were full of hurriedly filled graves, and the smoke rose up straight and still from the countryside, while the front page of German illustrated papers showed bareheaded soldiers, with their sleeves rolled up, munching apples as they set off to conquer the world. Hope dried up suddenly, like a well.

The Germans' victorious summer, as it rolled eastward, left us stranded on that floor formed by the hardened sediments of their violence, their extortions, their acts of murder, which already disfigured the whole of Europe. The drift of war away from us had only removed the unusualness of these things; the things themselves remained, only instead of

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seeming improvised they had assumed a workmanlike character; ruins were now hand-made, homes became prisons, murder was premeditated.

The Jews of Brodno had practically stopped working inside the camp, where everything was now in order. Those who were road-menders spent their time vainly searching the roads for other holes to fill; the saw-mill workers, whom we used to see on our way to the graveyard, kept on moving the same planks to and fro, with gestures that had become ominously slow. More and more frequently you could see men and women, wearers of the white armlet, standing motionless between houses or against a hedge, driven there by the somnambulism of fear.

Inside the camp the same fatal idleness impelled the French to line up against the barbed wire, with their empty knapsacks slung across their backs and clogs on their bare feet. To Jews and Frenchmen alike (to the former particularly) going and staying were equally intolerable fates, and they would advance timidly towards the edge of the road or of the barbed wire, take one step back and move a little to one side, as though seeking some state intermediary between departure and immobility. They would stand on the verge of imagined flight, and in their thoughts would dig illusory tunnels through time.

The tunnels we were digging might well have served them as models. Only ours had no outlet.

'Indeed, yes, Peter, graves have outlets,' Ernst told me.

He had just brought me the stories of Klemens von Brentano. Death having left us a brief respite, we had gone off for a walk in the forest. A little way behind us, my comrades were gathered round Otto, the other sentry.

'What's he saying?' they shouted to me. I turned round. Otto repeated the words he had just uttered.

'He says that at home he was the best marksman in the district,' I translated.



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'Yes, we got that, he won some competitions. But he said something about birds. . . .'

'He can kill a bird on a branch fifty metres off with one shot. He's ready to prove it to us presently.'

Otto was smiling, his neck wrinkling. His boast sounded like a public tribute when repeated as an aside by somebody else. I went back to Ernst.

'He's a nuisance with his stories of good marksmanship! Shots would make too much noise in the forest and in these parts they mean only one thing. I was going to take you to see the girls who work where the new road's being made. If he shoots we shall find them all terrified. . . .'

The project had a frivolous ring but Ernst forestalled my questions:

'They are young Jewish girls, unfortunate creatures. I've made friends with one of them. Every evening I take her some bread—a little bread; it's my own bread—at least, part of my own bread,' he added in some confusion, recalling the daily agony of sharing it, his hunger and his weakness.

'Why are we going to see them?' I asked him. 'We can't do anything for them. You know that.'

'You are French, and the point is this: these are girls from the cultured classes of Brodno. They are better dressed than the peasants, they don't speak the same language, they had relations in various other countries, and now they are isolated, as though by some terrible curse. Nothing can save them from their isolation. Even if tomorrow the peasants round here were to be persecuted, the girls would find no support amongst them, no sense of kinship, no co-operation. Believe me, they've always been exiles in the East, even before the Germans settled here. And perhaps only you and I share what they've got, what makes them different. So don't run away.'

'How could I run away?' I pointed to his gun. Ernst

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reddened with anger and shook his head. Behind us, big Otto had seen my gesture: 'Don't talk to the pastor about his gun,' he called out to me. 'He thinks it's a fishing-rod.'

I turned round. 'Please note that I'm just as much a pacifist as he is,' Otto said. 'Only I know how to shoot!'

He burst out laughing. Cordonat was near him and beckoned to me. 'Ask him to choose a biggish target,' he said as I came up, 'a rabbit for instance or a jay or a rook. Let's at least have something to get our teeth into!'

I passed on the request to Otto.

'But then it wouldn't be a demonstration,' he cried. 'It's got to be quite a tiny animal.'

I tried to explain to him that he could still keep to the rules of the game if he stood further away from his living target. The argument seemed likely to go on indefinitely.

Ernst walked on ahead of us, indifferent to our conversation, with his back a little bent, like a recluse, and in addition that pathetic look that small men have when they are unhappy. He was going forward through the forest without keeping to the paths, and the forest was growing thicker. Already, we felt cut off from the outside world here, just because the shadows were a little deeper and the ground was carpeted with dead leaves, moss, myrtles and nameless plants. For us, as for millions of others, war meant 'the fear of roads'. These enslaved men looked at you sometimes with eyes like horses'.

There was still the sky, the sky between the branches when you raised your head, an unyielding sky, still heavy with threats. Daylight is up there. I must be dreaming. It was as if when you pushed open the shutters after a night full of bad dreams the influx of light proved powerless to dispel the terrifying visions of the darkness from your eyes. And yet everything is there, quite real. You need a second or third awakening, the manœuvring of a whole set of sluice-gates,

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before the morning light yields what you expect of it—not so much truth as justice.

After a few minutes I caught up with Ernst. I was afraid of disappointing him by showing so little interest in the visit he had suggested to me. Perhaps he had given it up; the thought caused me no remorse, for he was a man with too clear a conscience, too easily moved to compassion. But even if I had interfered with the execution of his plans, I did not want him to think me indifferent or insensitive.

‘I’m hungry,’ I said as I drew near him, so as to avoid further explanations.

‘So am I. But we shall soon find these girls, and they’ll give us some coffee—they make it out of roasted grain. That’ll help to appease our hunger. Afterwards we’ll go and fell the trees. And then Otto will have plenty of time to fire his shots.’

The trees that we were to fell were intended to build a fence round the graveyard. Ernst had discovered this excuse to justify our walks. We were now on a path that led down to the verge of the forest. The new road that was being made skirted it at this point and the workmen had set up a few huts for their gear and for the canteen. Eight Jewish girls worked here under German orders on various tasks, and two of them kept the canteen.

These were the girls we saw first when Ernst, telling his mate we were going to get some coffee, led me towards the hut. The two girls had come out over the threshold. They were wearing faded summer dresses whose original colours suggested Western fashions and cheap mass-production. That was enough to introduce into this woodland setting an urban note which would have struck one as strange even without the added impression of bewilderment and weariness conveyed by the pale faces and wild eyes of the two girls. In spite of their youth, their features were devoid of charm. Beautiful faces were rare in this war; those faces which were

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daily taken from one were like commonplace relatives full of modest virtues, known intimately and loved and now gone into the night, unforgettable faces with their freckles and their tear-stained eyes.

When they recognized Ernst the two girls nodded gently. They stayed close together on the door-step. Ernst spoke to them, calling them by their names. We were Frenchmen, he told them, prisoners too, hungry and unhappy. 'Nothing was happening.' We looked at each other, helplessly. What conversation could we hold? Everything had been said before we opened our mouths. It was not to one another that we must listen but to the far-off heavens, to which some day perhaps would rise the noise of our deliverance.

'We can't give you coffee,' said one of the girls to Ernst. 'The *meister* hasn't given us any grain today.'

Ernst had poked his head inside the hut to peer round. 'Who's that?' he asked in a whisper. I looked too. In a corner of the room a man in black was leaning over a basin, with his back towards us. He was dipping a rag in water and from time to time raising it to his face. One could guess from the stiff hunching of his shoulders and the timidity betrayed by his slow awkward gestures that he felt our eyes upon him.

'It's a man from the saw-mill,' quickly replied one of the girls. 'He hurt his face at work.'

'But he doesn't work up here,' said Ernst. 'If the *meister* finds him here there'll be a row.'

'He'll go away when you've gone,' said the smaller of the two girls, speaking for the first time and with an ill-disguised nervousness. She was dirty, with untidy red hair hanging down each side of her face. 'The other sentinel mustn't see him,' she went on in a low voice. 'Please, Herr Pastor, be kind and take your Frenchman further off.'

'Where is Lidia?' asked Ernst.

'She's working on the tip-trucks,' said the other girl.

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'She's being punished because she broke the cord of the hooter this morning.'

'It's not fair!' went on the smaller girl, with bitterness. 'The cord was rotten. When she tried to stop the hooter, at seven o'clock, the cord broke off in her hand. The hooter went on wailing long after everybody was at work. All the steam was being wasted. The *meister* called it insubordination. It's not fair . . . Yesterday they hanged four more men at Tarnopol.'

'The way that hooter went on wailing,' said her friend. 'There was something sinister about it—it was like a warning. But what was the use of warning us? How could we move? What could we do?' she added anxiously.

Ernst did not answer. He stood with downcast eyes.

'Perhaps I'll come back tonight,' he said after a while. 'Tell Lidia. God be with you.'

We joined the group of prisoners who were waiting for us, guarded by Otto, and plunged once more into the forest.

'Somebody must have hit him,' muttered Ernst as I walked at his side. 'I'm speaking of that man we saw in the hut,' he added, with a look at me. 'He didn't want us to see the blood.'

'Why not?'

'Because they feel that to let their blood be seen is not only a confession of weakness, of impotence, but moreover it marks them out as belonging to the scattered herd of blood-stained victims who are being ruthlessly hunted down. While they are whole, they'll carry on as long as their luck holds; when they're wounded, they go out to meet their own death. The order of things that has been established here is all-embracing, Peter. If a civilian—if one of these civilians is found with blood on him, the authorities think the worst. Where did he get it, who gave him leave to move about? Why is he branded with that mark, and why is he not with the herd of the dead? There's something suspicious about it. That man

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was well aware of this. He was hiding. He'd "stolen" a beating. . . .'

'Do you think those girls are really in danger?'

While I was asking Ernst this question I realized that I had no wish to learn from him whether their danger was great or small. For the last few minutes I had experienced that slight nausea which, at the time, was more effective than any outward sign in warning me of imminent peril. Before Ernst could answer me a shot rang out behind us. Otto lowered his rifle and Cordonat ran towards a bush: 'It's a jay!' he called out to me.

But I was observing the amazement created all around us, in the lonely forest, by the sudden report. I thought I caught sight of a grey figure disappearing swiftly between distant tree-trunks. Then everything was as it had been, unmoving. I did not want to talk any more, and Ernst seemed not to want to either. That rifle-shot had been like a blow struck with a clenched fist on a table, a call to order, silencing all chatter, even the private chatter of the heart. Otto was looking at us with a smile. He was looking at Ernst and myself. The bullet had passed just over our heads. He stopped smiling just as I was about to speak, to try and break out of that clear-cut circle which henceforward would enclose the three of us and within which we were now bound to one another by the dangerous silence that had followed our commonplace words.

## VI

The dead used to be brought to us in the morning, like mail that comes with habitual irregularity and provides no surprises; their belongings had to be classified, bills of lading for ships that have long since put out to sea; a cross had to be provided, with a name and a date. Now the coffins no longer showed those once ever-present wooden faces like those of

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eyeless suits of armour. Now a dead man in his coffin was no longer a human being wrapped in a door.

All we knew of the dead was their weight. However, this varied enough to arouse in us occasionally a sort of suspicion that somehow seemed to rarefy this inert merchandise. Unconsciously one was led to think in terms of a soul. A dead body that felt exceptionally heavy or, on the other hand, too light, reassumed some semblance of personality, smuggled in, as it were, in that unexpected gap between the weight of an 'average' corpse and that of this particular corpse.

Things had begun to take their course. We might have been tempted to open the coffin, to examine the inscrutable face, to question the dead man's friends and search out his past history. But it was too late; the coffin was being lowered on its ropes, it lay at the bottom of the grave on the two supports we had placed there; the body was laid down, laid on its andirons and already more than half consumed with oblivion, loaded with ashes.

By now our burial-ground comprised seventeen graves. The flowers had grown and we were preparing to open a new section. It would be another row of graves set below the first, which lay alongside the verge of the forest. We were thus tackling the second third of the graveyard, for its limits had been strictly set from the beginning. Hardly two months had passed since our arrival at Brodno and we were already beginning to wonder if the graveyard would last out as long as we did, or if it would be full before we left the camp, so that some day we might find ourselves confronted with an overflow of dead bodies which would have to be disposed of in a hasty, slapdash, sacrilegious way.

We foresaw that times would have changed by then; we might have a snowy winter, for instance, full of urgent tasks, and the fortunes of war would be drooping like a bent head. The limits of the burial ground, in a word, were those of our

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future, of our hope; all summer was contained within them. This summer had begun radiantly.

Fed by marshlands, fanned by the great wind blowing off the plain, the forest was aglow with its thousands of tree-trunks—beeches and birches for the most part—and its millions of leaves; carpeted with monkshood and borage, it projected into the middle of the wide wilderness, somewhat like a mirage no doubt, but above all like a narrow concession made to the surrounding landscape, to the past, and, in a more practical sense, to the dead.

We had gone through it now in all directions. As soon as a funeral was over Ernst and Otto would take us off to the hamlets that lay on the other side of the forest. There we would buy food from the peasants in exchange for linen and military garments from our Red Cross parcels; the barter took place swiftly and in silence, as though between thieves. We brought home a few fowls or rabbits, which we hurriedly slaughtered in the forest, using our knees and cursing one another, while the sentries guarded the paths.

We would wipe our hands with leaves. Then the dead creature had to be slipped inside one's trousers, between one's legs, held up by strings tied round the head and feet and wound round one's waist. The volume of the body, the feel of fur or feather, the temporary invasion of the lice they harboured, the smell of blood and a lingering warmth made us feel as though we were saddled with some ludicrous female sexual appendage, as though we had given birth to something hairy and shapeless that obliged us to walk clumsily, with straddled legs.

This stratagem enabled us to get back into the camp safely; I had no hesitation about resorting to it under the eyes of Ernst, since the very vulgarity of my movements, my grotesque gait, freed me from the mental complicity that bound me to him. It was a sort of revenge against despair. Sometimes,



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on the way back, we would catch a distant glimpse of the men and women at work on the new road. Ernst pointed out Lidia to me; she was wearing a light-coloured dress and pushing a tip-truck full of earth. Rain was threatening: 'She's going to get soaked to the skin,' Ernst muttered.

'Why Lidia?' I asked.

'Yes, why Lidia . . .' he echoed, in torment, his head downcast.

'I meant why are you particularly interested in her?' It was hard to keep up this tone with a barely-dead fowl stuck between your thighs.

'One has to make a choice, Peter,' Ernst murmured. 'One can't suffer tortures on every side at once. Mind you, that doesn't mean . . .'

Otto was behind us, though far enough not to catch our words. I felt sure that if we went on talking like this he would soon shoot at a jay, a magpie, the first bird he saw. There's always one ready to fly off from an empty branch over your head, a little way in front of you or to one side. At every word, like involuntary beaters, we 'put up' a covey of pretexts, birds with strange plumage and taunting cries. I turned round; Otto was smiling. Since I had begun carrying slaughtered animals between my legs his smile had grown broader; I was a 'Kerl'. Suddenly his smile froze: 'Halt!' he called to me, pointing into the depths of the forest. Two figures were rapidly disappearing between the trees.

'Partisans,' he said, hurriedly smiling again.

The word 'partisans', as he spoke it, seemed to indicate some species of big game, rare and practically invulnerable, some solitary stag or boar shaking the unmysterious undergrowth with its startled gallop. Yet my heart had leapt. One morning, when we reached the burial-ground, we caught sight of black smoke drifting over a hamlet in the plain. Otto explained to me that some partisans, having been given a

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poor reception there in the night, had burnt it by way of reprisals. After that the open German cars that drove through Brodno assumed a warlike aspect, despite their gleaming nickel and brightly polished bodies. For beside the officers they were carrying sat two helmeted soldiers armed with tommy-guns.

We did not see them for long; the partisans seemed to have disappeared. In the villages, the Germans had distributed arms and formed militias. A watchman blew a bugle at the first alarm; it was a sort of long wail in the depth of the night which, generally without cause, made those who had taken refuge in treachery stir in their uneasy sleep. During the day Ukrainian policemen passed along the little path below the graveyard. They wore a black uniform with pink, yellow or white braid and badges of the same colours in checks, circles or triangles, like the gaudy signals of some obscure code hung out on the semaphores of terror.

The Germans acknowledged the stiff salutes of these liveried men with a nonchalant air. The Jews shrank back when they drew near; the Ukrainian policemen had the wild cruelty of certain sheepdogs, and above all their eyes and their voices recalled traditional pogroms. A few days earlier they had killed three prisoners who had escaped from the camp, shooting them down in the wood.

When they passed near us Cordonat would taunt them under his breath in the patois of Languedoc. These muttered insults showed the total disconnectedness of everything; what mazes of recent history one would have to explore to account for this absurd conflict between a Ukrainian peasant dressed in a stage uniform and a *vigneron* from the South of France who, before the war, used to vote anti-Communist and who was now talking, in his patois, about joining the Volynian partisans.

Otto made fun of the Ukrainian policemen out loud when

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they had gone past us, and embarked on a conversation with Cordonat in which gestures to a large extent filled the gaps in their vocabulary; after a lengthy exchange of naïvely pacifist opinions, they had ended by discussing hunting, poaching and mushrooms.

Ernst appeared to be growing somewhat mistrustful of his companion. In order to be able to speak freely to me he evolved the plan of taking me almost every day to the saw-mill to get our woodcutting tools sharpened. I had never expressed any wish for these *tête à tête* conversations. They only lasted, actually, during the time we took to walk from the burial-ground to the saw-mill. This saw-mill was worked on behalf of the Germans by a Jewish employer and his men. I met there the man with the wounded face of whom we had caught sight a few days earlier in the girls' hut.

I had asked the boss of the saw-mill for a glass of water, as he stood talking to us in front of the workshop door. He turned round and asked someone inside, whom I could not see, to bring me one. A few minutes later Isaac Lebovitch came up to me carrying a glass of water. It was a glass of fine quality, patterned with a double ring, the remnant of a set no doubt, and its fragility and bourgeois origin made me uneasy. In this token of hospitality I recognized an object which might have been a family heirloom of my own. Isaac Lebovitch (he was soon to tell me his name) seemed to be about thirty years old. He had a long face with a lean beak of a nose. His dark curly hair, already sparse, grew low on his forehead. He stood beside us while I was emptying my glass.

'It may be that our hour has struck,' the master of the saw-mill was saying to Ernst. 'It may be that the end of our race is in sight. There are things written up there,' he added, pointing to the sky which was empty of birds, empty of hope.

I noticed a vine climbing round the door of the saw-mill.

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In that region where vines had never been cultivated it looked strange, like a Biblical symbol.

'... And yet,' the saw-mill boss was saying, 'I myself fought during the last war in the Austro-Hungarian army. I was an N.C.O. and I won a medal. That means I was on your side, doesn't it?'

I felt embarrassed as I listened to his words. He was quite an old man, no sort of rebel against order or established authority, ready to accept a strict social hierarchy and even a certain degree of victimization to which his religion exposed him. . . . But not this, not what was happening now! These things were on the scale of a cosmogony. Or worse: they took you into a universe which perhaps had always existed behind the solid rampart of the dead, and of which the metaphors of traditional rhetoric only gave you superficial glimpses: where the bread was, literally, snatched from one's mouth, where one could not keep body and soul together, where one really was bled white and died like a dog.

Like novice sorcerers inexpert in the magic of words, we now beheld the essential realities of hell, escaping from the dry husks of their formulae, come crowding towards us and over us: the black death of the plague, the bread of affliction, the pride of a louse. . . . Seeing that Ernst was listening, with a look of deep distress, to the old man's words, Lebovitch plucked up courage to speak to me. He first addressed me in German, asking me whereabouts in France I lived, what sort of job I had, whether my relatives over there suffered as much from the German occupation as the people here did; then he suddenly spoke a sentence in English.

It was quite an ordinary sentence like 'life isn't good here'. There was really no need to wrap it up in the secrecy of another language, since it was no more compromising than the words that had preceded it; and no doubt he had only had recourse to these English words for the sake of their foreign-

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ness. A language does not always remain intact; when it has been forced to express monstrous orders, bitter curses and the mutterings of murderers, it retains for a long time those insidious distortions, those sheer slopes of speech from the top of which one looks down dizzily. In those days the German language was like a landscape full of ravines, from the depths of which rose tragic echoes.

'No, life isn't good here,' I answered in German. 'But out there in the forest . . .'

'I don't go there any more. The other day . . .' Lebovitch showed me the dry wound on his forehead. 'Besides, you saw . . .'

'Probably you didn't go far enough, you didn't venture into the depths. . . .'

'I had just gone to see Lidia,' said Lebovitch, surprised by my remark. 'I had no reason to go further. You're liable to meet the partisans. . . .'

'That's just what I meant.'

He stayed silent for a moment. We had moved a little further off and had turned our backs on Ernst and the old man. Lebovitch stepped still further to one side and, realizing that he wanted me to come away from the other two, I went up beside him.

'The partisans,' he said with an anxious air. 'I'll tell you this: we don't know much about them. If they saw me coming up to them they might shoot me down. And how could I live in that forest? I've got no strength left,' he gasped, striking his thin chest with his fist. 'And then there's so much violence, so much bloodshed every day, and all those farms set on fire. . . . After all, we're managing to hold out here. I've held out up till now. Perhaps we've been through the hardest part now. Listen, I may perhaps be dead tomorrow but I think it's better for me to save my strength. Don't you think that's best for you too?'

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It would have been cruel to tell him that the dangers that threatened us seemed less terrible than his own, and I left him to his patience.

'That girl you call Lidia, who works on the new road,' I remarked, 'isn't she the one my sentry knows?'

'He ought to stop trying to see her. She told me so. It's likely to do her a lot of harm. I think she's had herself sent to the tip-trucks on purpose because of him, so that he can't try to see her during the daytime. What's he want with her, anyway? He knows that relations of that sort are forbidden. He'll only get her hanged, and himself after her.'

'He wants to help her.'

Lebovitch grasped me by the arm, after making sure that the other two could not see him: 'Let me tell you this, Frenchman: the Germans can help nobody, d'you understand, nobody. They couldn't if they wanted to, they couldn't any longer. Imagine a hedgehog struggling to stop being a hedgehog; you wouldn't want to go near him then!'

Ernst called me. The tools were ready. We had to get back to the graveyard. As I left Lebovitch I was careful not to tell him that we would soon be back. It was no doubt bad for him and his friends that we should be seen at the saw-mill too often. We must each keep to his own solitude; fraternization had become conspiracy.

As we walked back, I spoke to Ernst about Lebovitch. 'He's a friend of your Lidia's,' I told him. 'He's afraid that your interest in her may compromise her in the eyes of the German authorities.'

'He's wrong,' replied Ernst in an offhand manner. 'You know I'm a pastor, and although I'm not a chaplain, the Commandant, who comes from my home town (only yesterday he was asking me for news of my family), gives me tacit permission to make some approaches to these people in a

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priestly capacity, to behave with a little more humanity in other words. . . .’

‘Humanity,’ I echoed.

‘I know what you’re thinking, Peter,’ murmured Ernst. ‘Well, even if your thoughts correspond to the reality, what about it? Won’t you ever understand?’ he cried, appealing, far beyond me, to some unknown body of critics. ‘We are all lost. There’s nothing for us to fall back on; there never will be. Even the earth has begun to fail us. In such conditions, who can forbid me to love in whatever way I can? Who can forbid me? This is the last form of priesthood open to me, Peter—the last power I’ve got. It’s inadequate and clumsy, it needs to be exercised upon a living object, a single object. . . .’

His lips went on moving. I said nothing. I would not have known what to say. And then Otto was already watching us come, from the top of the burial-ground; the evening sun was behind his back and we could not see his face. He was standing motionless with his rifle on his shoulder. Behind him the graves were casting their shadows to one side, like beasts of burden relieved of their packs.

## VII

From that time on, discovering into what abysses I might be dragged if I followed Ernst, I fell back on the position of safety provided by the graveyard. Here was the only innocent place. Here we seemed to find a sort of immunity. When an officer came to inspect us we each bent as low as possible over a grave, assiduously weeding it as though pressed for time, without raising our heads, and the visitor refrained from speaking to us, wondering (probably for the first time in his life) if we were acting thus in response to some urgent appeal from the dead, such as he himself might perhaps have heard

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(it suddenly came back to him) in the middle of the night, in the days when he still felt remorse.

'The weeds are the white hair of the dead,' Cordonat would say, and his words savoured of that senile cult whose hold on us grew in proportion to the dangers that threatened us.

These dangers now assumed the shapes and sunburnt faces of S.S. men and military policemen, a few detachments of whom had recently arrived in the region of Brodno. But it was above all the growing silence of that summer, the pallor of the sun at certain hours, the oppressive heat that secretly frightened us. Our religion, which had never actually been a cult of the dead, was becoming a cult of the grave. As we dug and then filled up our pits, we appeased some haunting dream of underground.

With our twenty-two dead, we had already opened up and explored a real labyrinth. We were familiar with its passages, its detours, its angles. It was a sort of deep-down landscape. We knew just where a tangle of hanging roots clutched clods of earth, where you could catch the smell of a distant spring, where you passed over a slab of granite. In the course of our work of excavation we had grown used to the coolness of this universe of the dead and we found our way about it mentally with the help of these particularities of structure rather than with the help of the names of the dead men who had drifted there accidentally, like foreign bodies.

This longing for the depths, unsatisfied by our task of weeding on the surface of the graves, impelled Cordonat and myself to try and open up a trench which would run a few yards into the forest and drain away the rain-water that poured down on to the graves and scored deep furrows in their unstable earth. Since we now no longer left the burial-ground to walk in the forest, which was patrolled by the soldiers who had recently come to Brodno, I was looking for an occupation.



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Digging this trench had another very different result; it was through this narrow channel that I happened on something that I had been anxiously anticipating for many months. It began under my feet, like a forest fire. Right at the start, we had got on fairly fast with our trench and were now digging in the sandy soil of the forest, among the live roots of the trees. Below us our comrades were lying beside the graves, plucking the weeds from off the dead with one hand. Otto and Ernst were sitting in the shade of the trees, Ernst reading *Louis Lambert*, which had just been sent to me and which I had lent him. As we worked, Cordonat was telling me about his *landes*. When we stopped to change tools, for we used pick and spade in turn, we shared out a little tobacco. The war seemed endless but here, at this precise moment, under this white silent sky, it had a flavour of patience, a flavour of sand; it bore the same relation to life as a fine sand to a coarser sand.

It was not with the pickaxe but with the sharp edge of the spade that I cut open the arm of the corpse. It was lying flush with the side of the trench and as I was levelling the walls I struck right into the flesh. It was pink, like certain roots, like a thick root covered with black cloth instead of bark. My blow had ripped off a bit of the sleeve. I started back, spell-bound with horror. Cordonat came up and then called the sentries. Everybody was soon gathered round the unknown corpse. A little earth had crumbled away and his elbow and wounded arm were now projecting into the void; he was literally emerging from a wall.

'Cover it up with earth,' said Otto.

'We'll make a cross of branches,' murmured Ernst.

They went back into the graveyard with our comrades; the problem of burying this corpse was beyond them. It is easy, it is even tempting to throw earth on a dead body. Often, after our burials, we managed, using boards and

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spades, to push into the earth at one go most of the heaped-up earth that lay at its brink. Here, one would have had to cover over the arm that projected from the wall of earth, to enclose it in an overhanging recess. We therefore decided to fill up our trench and start it again lower down, skirting round the corpse. I did not know what name to give it. But all the indications (the colour of the clothes, their 'civilian' appearance) suggested that the body was that of a Jew who had been killed there before our arrival or during one night, or maybe on a Sunday, very hurriedly no doubt, in a hush like that of a suicide.

I felt slightly sick. It was very hot. We were working with fierce concentration now, in silence. A few hours later, when we were digging our trench at some distance from the corpse, Cordonat, who was wielding his pickaxe ahead of me, suddenly started back. A sickly, intolerable smell arose; he had just uncovered a second body. This one was lying at the bottom of the trench, slightly askew and concealed by a thin layer of earth, so that Cordonat had trodden on it before, surprised by the elasticity of the soil, he exposed its clothing and the upper part of a mouldering face.

I was overwhelmed by the sombre horror of it and the truth it revealed. This was death—these liquefying muscles, this half-eaten eye, those teeth like a dead sheep's; death, no longer decked with grasses, no longer ensconced in the coolness of a vault, no longer lying sepulchred in stone, but sprawling in a bog full of bones, wrapped in a drowned man's clothes, with its hair caught in the earth.

And it was as though, looking beyond the idealized dead with whom I had hitherto populated my labyrinths, my underground retreats, I had discovered the state of insane desolation to which we are reduced when life is done. Death had become 'a dead thing', no more; just as some being once endowed with great dignity and feminine mystery may, after a slow

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degeneration, surrender to the grossest drunkenness and fall asleep on the bare ground, wrapped in rags; here, the rags were flesh. Death was this: a dead mole, a mass of putrefaction sleeping, its scalp covered with hair or maybe with fur: wreckage stranded in the cul-de-sac of an unfinished tunnel: surrender at the end of a blind-alley.

Cordonat discovered three more bodies. We had struck the middle of a charnel, a heap of corpses lying side by side in all directions, in the middle of the wood, a sort of subterranean bivouac which even now, when he had exposed it to the light, lost none of its clandestine character. We shouted, but in vain; this time nobody came to us. We turned over the earth till we were exhausted in an effort to cover up the bodies. We were practising our craft of gravediggers in sudden isolation. And now it had assumed a wildly excessive character; we were gravediggers possessed by feverish delirium. Night was falling. We had ceased to care who these men were, who had killed them or when; they were irregular troops on the fringe of the army of the dead, they were 'partisans' of another sort. We should never have finished burying them.

Their very position close by our own graveyard cruelly emphasized its prudent orderliness. Our dead, meekly laid out in rows, suddenly seemed to exude servility and treachery, wearing their coffins like a wooden livery.

The appalling stench of these accidentally exhumed corpses persisted for a long time in the forest, and spread over our graveyard. It was as though our own dead had awakened for a moment, had turned over in their graves, like wild animals hazily glimpsed in the sultry torpor that precedes a storm. There could be no doubt that something was going to happen. The smell warned one that the tide was about to turn.

The thundery heat and the horror of my discoveries made me feverish. Back in camp, I lay prostrate for several days on the wooden bed. Myriads of fleas had invaded the barrack-

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rooms and were frenziedly attacking us, while in the shadow of my clothes I traced the searing passage of my lice. Towards evening Cordonat brought me a little water. This was so scarce that at the slightest shower all the men would rush outside clutching vessels, bare-headed, like ecstatic beggars, and when the rain stopped they sprawled on the ground, still jostling one another, round the spitting gutters. Then my fever dropped. When I went back to the burial-ground the first trains had begun to pass.

### VIII

A railway line ran over the plain that we overlooked from our mound. It was only a few hundred yards away. Until then we had paid little attention to it, for the traffic was slight or non-existent. During my absence it had increased without my noticing it; these trains sounded no whistles. If they had, I should have heard them from my bed in the camp; I should have questioned my comrades and they could have enlightened me, for from certain windows in the building you could see a section of the line, beyond the station which was hidden by houses.

The first trains had gone past behind us, full of stifled cries and shouts, like those trains that pass all lit up, crammed with human destinies and snatched out of the night with a howl while, framed in the window of a little house near the railway, a man in his shirtsleeves stands talking under a lamp, with his back turned, and then walks off to the other end of the room. And now, from the graveyard, I could see them coming, panting in the heat of the day, interminable convoys that had started a long time ago, long goods-trains trickling slowly through the summer marshalling-yards, collecting men on leave and refugees like a herd of lowing cattle.

I could hear their rumbling long before they appeared past

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the tip of the forest, and then when they were in sight (sometimes almost before) I could hear another sound, superimposed and as elusive as a singing in one's ears, a buzzing in one's head, or the murmur in a sea-shell: the sound of people calling and weeping.

The trains consisted of some twenty goods vans sandwiched between two passenger coaches, one next the engine and one at the rear. At the windows of these two coaches (they were old ones, green, with bulging bodywork) stood uniformed Germans smoking cigars. All the rest of the train was an inferno.

The cries seemed transparent against the silence, like flames in the blaze of summer. What they were shouting, these men and women and children heaped together in the closed vans, I could not tell. The cries were wordless. The human voice, hovering over the infinite expanse of suffering like a bird over the infinite sea, rose or fell, ran through the whole gamut of the wind before it faded into the distance, leaving behind it that same serene sky, that store of blue that bewildered birds and dying men can never exhaust. On the side of each van a narrow panel was open near the roof, framing four or five faces pressed close together, with other halves and quarters of faces visible between them and at the edges, the clusters of eyes expressing terror.

But it was more than terror, it was a sort of death-agony of fear; the time for beating their breasts was over and now they watched the interminable unrolling of that luminous landscape which they were seeing for the last time, where there was a man standing free and motionless in the middle of a field, and trees, and a harvester, and the impartial summer sun, while your child was suffocating, pressed between your legs in the overcrowded van and weeping with thirst and fright. Here and there a child was hoisted up to the narrow opening. When its head projected the German guards in the

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first carriage would fire shots. You had to stand still there in front of the opening and bear silent witness to what was going on in the dense darkness of the van: women fainting, old men unable to lie down, newborn babies turning blue, crazed mothers howling—while you watched the symbols of peace slowly filing past.

The trains followed one another at short intervals. Empty trains came back. Beside the narrow openings the deported victims had hung vessels in the hope of collecting water—mess-tins, blue enamel mugs—like pathetic domestic talismans which a mocking Fate kept jingling hollowly as the train disappeared in the dusty distance. They had no thought of displaying sacred draperies or waving oriflammes at this window; death was yet another journey, and they set out armed with water-bottles.

Empty trains came back. I recognized them by the sound of the engine's panting.

'Now then, get busy, boys,' Otto would tell us.

We had been given a third sentry. Brodno was crammed with troops and they had to be made use of. Ernst was some distance away from us, pale, his lips tight.

'Do you know why they're being taken off and where they're being taken to?' I asked the sentry whom I did not know.

'Delousing,' he answered calmly. 'Got to make an end of this Jewish vermin. It's quickly done. It happens some thirty miles away. I'm told it's with electricity or gas. Oh, they don't suffer anything. In one second they're in Heaven.'

This man, as I learnt later, was an accountant from Dresden. He might just as well have been a blacksmith from Brunswick, a cobbler from Rostock, a peasant from Malchin, a professor from Ingolstadt, a postman from Kuxhafen or a navvy from Bayreuth; he would have used the same language. And he did use the same language under all these different aspects, shift-

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ing from one to another like an agile actor impelled by Evil, altering his voice to suit each of these thousands of masks, imbuing it with the atmosphere of profound calm appropriate to Ingolstadt, Malchin, Bayreuth and countless other equally humane cities, and repeating, 'Oh, they don't suffer, they don't suffer!'

Trains came down from the far depths of Volynia and the Ukraine, loaded with death-agonies, with tears and lamentations. At one stop, further up, the German guards had tossed dead children on to the roofs of the vans; nothing had to be left by the way, for each train was like the tooth of a rake. High up in the wall of the van, a little to the left in the narrow opening, there was a face; it seemed not living, but painted—painted white, with yellow hair, with a mouth that moved feebly and eyes that did not move at all: the face of a woman whose dead child was lying above her head; and beside the opening the little blue enamel mug, useless henceforward, shaken by every jolt of the train. Death can never appease this pain; this stream of black grief will flow for ever.

Towards the end of the morning I succeeded in drawing near to Ernst, who had moved away from the other two soldiers.

'It had started three months ago, at Brest Litovsk, when I was there,' he told me in a low, tense voice. 'But it wasn't on this scale. In a few days, tomorrow maybe, they'll begin on the people of this place. Do you think she ought to go away? To take refuge in the woods?'

He was looking at me bewilderedly, seeming more like a priest than ever with his smooth, babyish face, his indirect glance.

'It's probably the only chance they've got left,' I muttered, bending towards the turf on the grave, since the new sentry was slowly coming towards us.

'But you've seen her, she's not strong, she'll never stand

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up to such an ordeal!' cried Ernst without noticing that the soldier was now standing quite close to him.

The soldier looked at Ernst in some surprise and then went off, humming. I stood silent.

'Won't you speak to me, Peter?' asked Ernst humbly. 'You're saying to yourself: he thinks only of her. . . .'

'I mistrust the other sentry,' I answered. 'You're exposing yourself unnecessarily. If you're willing to run the risk, throw away your gun and go off into the forest with her.'

'I've thought of that,' said Ernst, hanging his head. 'I've thought of that. And then nothing gets done. You're horrified and you stay where you are. In this war, every man looks after himself. But we ought to realize that there can't be any true life afterwards for us, who have endured these sights. For me, there'll be no more life, Peter, do you hear, no more life. . . .'

His two companions called him and he went off abruptly. I lifted my head. Down below, there were only empty trains passing along the line. Towards evening all traffic ceased. Ernst did not speak another word to me as we went back to the camp. And I never saw him again.

## IX

Next day, when our gang turned up at the guardhouse, the Germans sent us back to our barracks. Soon rumours reached us: the Jews of Brodno were going to be taken away in their turn. Towards noon, looking out of the windows of our building, we saw the first procession of doomed victims appear on the little road leading to the station. Many of them—nursing what hopes, trusting in what promises?—had brought bundles and suitcases. The hastily-knotted bundles frequently let drop pieces of underlinen or scraps of cloth that nobody had time to pick up, since the soldiers were continually hurrying on the procession, with curses on their lips



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and rifle-butts raised. Other victims, arriving later, thus found themselves confronted with a scene of dispossession whose causes were as yet unknown to them, with the signs of ominous disorder.

The same signs were visible within their own group, where old men, children and adults were mingled; clearly there had been no attempt to sort them out, as had always happened hitherto before the removal of groups of workers or some other utilitarian deportation. The German soldiers from time to time struck at the sides of the column, but as we could only see them from a distance their gestures seemed to be slowed down: silent, clumsy blows, aimed low, more like stealthy misdeeds than like acts of violence. I had turned away from the window.

'Here are more of them!' somebody cried behind me.

Should I see Lidia, her friends, Lebovitch or the old man from the saw-mill in this group, or the man who mended the road, or the fair woman who often stood waiting between two houses? Their packs made their silhouettes misshapen. Some of the women hugged them against their stomachs like bundles of washing. The dust was rising and I could not make them out clearly. Somebody said: 'It's their children they're carrying. . . .'

Somebody said: 'One of them has fallen. The guards are hitting him. . . . Now he's up, he's starting off again. . . .' Somebody said: 'Oh, look at that woman running to catch up with the group!' The untiring commentaries, despite transient notes of pity, disclosed a sort of detachment, for passionate feeling will not allow you to see things through to the end, whereas these men followed the whole business with the mournful eagerness of witnesses. Evening drew on. I lay stretched out on the wooden bunk. At my side Cordonat was smoking in silence. Later on, flickering lights and distant rumblings rent the night. It was a stifling night, tense with

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anguish, and you could not tell whether those distant flares came from thunderclouds or from armed men on the march, carrying torches.

The arrests went on all next day. We were told by sentries that the cottage doors had been smashed in with axes and the inhabitants cleared out. Towards noon stifled cries were heard from the direction of the station. The victims, who had spent all night packed together in the vans standing in the sidings, were clamouring for water. By evening not a single train was left in the station. One man was walking along the track, bending down from time to time to check the rails. He went off into the distance, till he was almost invisible. Beyond, the pure sky grew deeper.

It was not until three days later that we set out once more on the road to the burial-ground. Two new sentries accompanied us. The road was empty, and most of the houses shut up. In one of them some Poles were setting up a canteen. A few men were working in front of the saw-mill. I recognized none of them.

At least we still had our dead, that faithful flock, each of whom we could call by his name without raising up a murdered man's face staring wide-eyed in the darkness. Our dead were already beginning to get used to their earth. After each of our absences they had 'put on green', as we said when the grass had once more invaded the graves. Our cult of the dead consisted in wiping away the shadow of a meadow, day by day. And once more the sentries surrendered.

They had come to the graveyard armed with mistrust. But here, amongst the dead, we got the better of them. In front of our tidy graves, so tirelessly tended, their antagonism dropped: our accounts were in order. The liquidations (in the business sense of the word) which the Germans were carrying on all round us only took place spasmodically, as though at an auction, in an atmosphere of anger and excess which, once

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the payment had been exacted, increased the insatiable credit of the murderers with a debt of bitter resentment; they found it hard to forgive their victims. Our dead, on the other hand, had needed no dunning. Although the Germans were never paid fast enough, these had not worn out their patience like the others; nobody was conscious of having forced them to die.

Then, too, they seemed to be lying at attention under their three feet of earth in properly dressed lines, whereas the others, who had been shot point-blank, hid their heads in the crook of their arms; they had to be pulled by the hair, in fact it was an endless business bringing them to heel.

When the charm of the graveyard had worked, I plucked up courage to ask one of the two soldiers if he knew what had become of Ernst.

'Oh, the little pastor!' he replied. 'He got punished. He's been sent to a disciplinary company. He knew a Jewess. They even say he burst out crying in the Commandant's office. Oh, don't talk to me about such people! Anyhow, I'm a Bavarian myself, so you see I'm of the same religion as you. I'm a Catholic, yes, but one's country comes first! Now get along and see to your graves.'

I had not had time to inquire about the fate of Otto. In any case I was not deeply concerned about it. I felt calmer; the punishment inflicted on Ernst seemed a light one. Moreover, it cemented our friendship more firmly. He stood beside me now in the rebels' camp, like those guests at a party whom you've expected for a long time, wondering whether they'll come, and who suddenly appear, all made up and grotesquely disguised, with their familiar kindly, serious eyes looking at you from under their hats, when the music has already started and the dark wine is being poured out all round you.

All this was happening in                      Our friendship needed some discipline, imposed from without, naturally. I was thinking of Lidia, too. Her relations with Ernst seemed to me

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solid ground, but there were stars, too. They still wheel round in my dreams. I do not know what became of them on earth, but in the map of heaven, and in the map of my heart, I know where to look for the distant glimmer of that unattainable love.

We never went back to the new road. Our kingdom grew narrower. No more walks in the forest; we only went down to the pond with sentries on either side of us, and we were forbidden to linger there; we were more than ever confined to the burial-ground. Otto and Ernst had already passed into a previous existence, threatened with oblivion, when we got news of the former: he sent us a corpse.

This was a fellow that I knew fairly well, a sullen-faced lad from Lyons obsessed by the urge to escape. Seeking an opportunity, he had asked me a few days earlier to let him take the place of a member of our gang who was too sick to leave the camp. He hoped to be able to make an easy getaway from the graveyard. I managed to get him accepted by our sentries. Underneath his uniform he was wearing some sort of escape outfit, and round his ankles there dangled long white laces belonging presumably to the linen trousers formerly issued to the French army. These were only too obvious. Silent, his jaws stiff with anxiety or determination, he thus attracted the guards' attention immediately. They never took their eyes off him and, that evening, he came back to the camp with us.

A few days later he got himself engaged in a gang of 'road commandos' (prisoners employed on road-mending at some distance from the town) guarded by several sentries, among whom was Otto. Otto, being indirectly involved in Ernst's punishment, had been posted in charge of this detachment, which performed the duties of a gang of convicts and was rated as such. One evening, as the group was about to pass through the town on its way back to the camp, the young Lyonnais broke ranks abruptly and began to run off into the

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fields. Otto promptly shouldered his gun and fired. The fugitive dropped; the bullet had gone in through his back and pierced his heart.

It was our first violent death. On the day of the funeral the Germans sent a wreath of fir-branches tied with a red ribbon. The wooden cross bore the inscription 'Fallen' instead of 'Died'. Our graveyard had been sorely in need of this heroic note, as I suddenly realized; it was as though it had received the Military Cross.

'You shall soon have some stones, too,' a sentry told me. 'I know that in the camp they've been asking for a stonemason. It's the Jews' tombstones you're going to get; their graveyard's full of them, down there in the forest. We shall use them for the roads too. You people can't complain, your graveyard's much finer than the one where our own men are buried. . . .'

It was quite true. With its ever green turf, its flowerbeds, its carefully sanded paths edged with small black fir-trees which we had transplanted, with its rustic fence of birch-boughs, against the dark background of the forest verge, our graveyard seemed an 'idyllic' place, as the Germans put it. On Sunday the soldiers from the garrison used to come and photograph it. The more we adorned it the greater grew its fame, and it aroused a wave of curiosity like that which carries crowds to gaze at certain baroque works of art or at others which, devoid of any art, are yet prodigies of patience and skill: houses built of bottle-ends, ships made of matches, walking-sticks carved to fantastic monstrous triumphs of persistence and time.

On the fringe of the war, on the fringe of the massacres, on the fringe of Europe, sheltering behind our prodigious burial-ground, we seemed like hollow-eyed gardeners, sitters in the sun, fanatical weeders, busily working over the dead as over some piece of embroidery.

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But the thought of those stones horrified us. We did not want to rob the Jews of their steles; that savoured of sacrilege, and also of an incipient complicity with the Germans; and anyhow it 'wasn't playing fair'. We had made our graveyard out of earth and grass and to bring in marble would have been cheating. I went to lay the problem before the prisoners' French representative, the *homme de confiance* as we called him. He promised me to protest to the Germans. A few days later, in one corner of the camp, I saw a man sitting on the ground sawing and planing tombstones on which was carved a breaking branch.

He seemed in some doubt. Should each of the slabs of marble or granite intended for the graves (merely for epitaphs, not for funerary flagstones) represent an open book, a cushion (he could quite well picture a cushion slightly hollowed out by the weight of an absent head) or a coat of arms? He asked for my opinion. I told him angrily that I wasn't interested in his stones and that they should never cross the threshold of the graveyard. However, he went on cutting them, full of delight at getting back to his trade, heaping them one on the other when they were ready, although the Germans were now busy with something else and never came to ask for them. In any case, he could not have handed them over as they were, for the essential part of the inscription was missing.

Though my ill-will discouraged him at first, he soon tried to get from one of us the names of the dead and the dates which he needed. He met with the same refusal. Besides ourselves, only the Germans possessed these essential facts, but no prisoner had access to their offices. Thenceforward, he began a patient investigation, going from one building to the next, questioning the men on the deaths that had taken place there. I soon got wind of this. It made me angry. The stonemason's obstinacy, although of a purely professional character, had begun to look like an intrusion into our field. For

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the last few months we had managed to keep our tasks secret, and now I felt this secrecy threatened by the publicity that he was causing by his noisy investigation of our past.

One day I saw him turn up at the graveyard, following a funeral. The man we were burying that day had come most opportunely in the nick of time, after the lad from Lyons, who, having introduced an appropriately heroic note into the place, had since seemed to be inaugurating a sequence of violent deaths. For here the latest corpse set the tone; it was in front of the latest corpse that we made our military salutes each morning; it was his bare, sparsely sown grave that attracted the attention (albeit vacuous) of visitors. It seemed important therefore that the tone thus set should not be, for too long, that of violent death: after all, a habit is easily acquired. And so I should have been quite glad to welcome this newcomer who restored order to things had I not perceived, among the handful of Frenchmen walking behind the cart, the stonemason, sporting a swordbelt.

He had probably managed to slip into the procession by posing as one of the dead man's friends; he may even have been one really. . . . But we were already convinced of one thing: he had come to the graveyard to take measurements and pick up names. We decided to keep an eye on him, and we buried the corpse in a state of nervous tension although, in the depths of our innocent hearts, we had longed for it. We did not take our eyes off the man during the whole ceremony which, with its dying bugle-call and the report of arms fired into the sky, was like that which marks the close of a war. When the burial was over the Germans and the Frenchmen who had formed the procession hung about. As the fame of our graveyard increased, funerals had tended to become, for those who were able to attend them, a sort of summer excursion, a trip into the country from which you might well picture yourself returning with armfuls of flowers picked on

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the spot. The stonemason had moved towards the first row of graves. I followed him. He was already taking a notebook out of his pocket.

'What are you doing there?' I asked him, my voice distorted with anger.

'I've been told to make tombstones!' he said, very loud. 'You shan't prevent me! They don't belong to you, after all!' he added, indicating the graves of the dead.

'More than to you, anyhow!' I answered. 'We wouldn't go and put stolen stones on their graves. . . .'

'Stolen?' He shook his head. 'They're given to us and it's not our business to ask where they come from. . . . Well, I know, of course!' he went on, seeing that I was about to answer. 'And so what? Would you rather see them laid on the roads?'

'Yes, I'd rather see them laid on the roads. I suppose you get soup and bread from the Germans for doing this job?'

'Oh, don't you talk about that!' cried the stonemason. He brought his angry face close to mine. 'Everybody in the camp knows what you've wangled with your famous graveyard!' He stopped suddenly.

'Well then, tell me! Tell me!' I cried.

'Listen to me,' went on the stonemason in a quieter voice. 'Can't we make peace?'

Everything seemed conducive to this. The heat of the hour had led Frenchmen and Germans, in separate groups, to sit down beside the graves, where the forest trees cast their shade. Only our words disturbed the silence.

'Don't expect to get the names of the dead, whatever happens,' I answered.

'You can keep them,' said the stonemason, sitting down. He was a thin-faced man a little older than myself, with short greyish hair. 'We're an obstinate pair. After all, I understand your feelings; you don't want it to be said that those stones



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had names taken off them in order to carve these on. Well, I'd never have had the courage to take them off myself if they hadn't been written in Hebrew. But in Hebrew they mean nothing! I'm not even sure that they were names and dates. And then the stones were there in the camp, without anybody lying beneath them. Put yourself in my place! I'm bored, I need to keep my hand in for after the war, and I'm presented with tools and stones! But it's all right; I give up the names,' he added, pulling out his tobacco pouch and handing it to me.

I rolled a cigarette and he did the same.

'I give up the names,' he went on, puffing at his cigarette, 'but all the same, something really ought to be done with those stones—they're not all in good condition, you know, some of them are mouldering away. Besides, the dead people or their relations, if there are any left, wouldn't see any harm in our making use of these stones now that the Germans have pulled them up. They'd surely like that better than to see them crushed and scattered on the roads. . . . After all, we're on the same side as they are, aren't we? . . . So this is what I thought. Let's not talk of carving names on them, but let's make them into little ornaments, corner-stones for instance. We must think of our own dead too. I needn't comment on what you've done for them; it's quite unbelievable. But after all, there's nothing permanent about it. Suppose they take us off into Germany next month; after a single winter there'll be no sign of your graves. The rains and the melting snows will have washed all the earth away, and grass and briars will have grown over it. But with stones . . . Oh, I'm not suggesting making monuments,' he cried, raising his hand to forestall objections. 'I assure you, very little is needed. And I'm speaking from experience—I'm in the trade. A little pyramid at each corner of the grave for instance, or a ball on a little pedestal if you prefer, although that's much harder to make, or else carved corners joined together with chains, only

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unluckily we haven't any chains . . . well, you get the idea, something not very high, firmly fastened into the ground, preferably with cement, and above all something decently made. . . .'

But I was no longer listening to him. For the last few minutes I had been listening to the rumble of a train and now it was growing louder. The train was about to emerge round the tip of the wood. I could tell, without waiting for it to roll past before my eyes, what sort of freight it carried. Its slow, jolting sound warned me of the other sounds that would follow although for the moment a contrary wind delayed them. I should soon hear the weeping, the cries of despair. The silence, no doubt, was due to the wind, but perhaps, too, those who were being transported, knowing what fate awaited them, had deliberately refrained from sending out their lamentations into that empty, sun-baked plain, in which the great migrations of death had never yet awakened any lasting echo.

### x

And so it all began again. Every day one or two convoys crossed the plain, and then were no more to be seen; and when night fell a train would rumble, too slowly, through the silence. New processions appeared on the little road that led to the station. They were smaller and more infrequent than the previous ones and seemed to be made up of belated recruits, of survivors from some ancient and now almost forgotten disaster, of beggars or vagrants rounded up in the middle of their wasted summer. Nothing rolled out of the bundles this time; nobody seemed to be in a hurry now, and the soldiers who struck at the sides of the column did so with the lazy indifference of cowherds.

The massacre was drawing to a close, but it lingered inter-

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minably like the raw gleam of a lurid sunset on walls, between patches of shadow. We said to ourselves: 'Surely this must be the end of these torments.' The plain seemed to have nothing left to offer Death save its quota of vagrants. We were wrong. On the contrary, those whom the Germans were now despatching to be slaughtered had been taken from the ranks of a scattered resistance movement which, up till now, without our knowledge, had been fighting to the last ditch for the right to live.

If they seemed wearier than those who had gone before them along the same road that led between darkly gleaming slagheaps and through engine-sheds to Calvary, it was because they had suffered a twofold defeat. They had been surrounded in the forest, they had been arrested at night on the roads or among the brambles in the ravines, where for so long they had been wandering round and round in dazed despair. Now, in the evenings near the graveyard, we often caught sight of nonchalant armed soldiers making their way in extended line into the forest, or 'bending down from time to time to pick a strawberry. Brodno was encircled with a military cordon, and the whole region was being combed step by step.

This state of siege, of which we shortly felt the oppressive effects, brought back a certain animation around the camp and around our graveyard. The inhabitants—Poles, Ukrainians and Ruthenians—realizing that for the moment the Germans had no designs on them, suddenly felt the need to move around in all directions within the circle that hemmed them in. They came to look at the graveyard, the fame of which had reached them. They stood still at some distance from it, motionless, communicating with one another by gestures. One evening two girls came forward as far as the verge of the forest, close to the spot where we had discovered the charnel.

One of them was plain and awkward; the other was slender and seemed younger. The brightness of her blue-green eyes disturbed me. They shouted to the soldiers that they were Polish. The setting, the gathering dusk and my own troubled heart made the younger girl's smile seem like that of a vision. To the German who, with one foot on a grave, asked them their names and ages, she called out 'Maria!' and there was still joy in her voice. I had gone up to the sentry; the girl looked at me and waved to me as she went off. Next day as we made our way to the graveyard I caught sight of her at the door of the new canteen and we made signs of greeting to each other.

From that time on I clung to her image. The first rains of autumn had begun; the graveyard had ceased to be a garden and was once more a burial-ground. The earth sank under one's feet; it was deep again, and heavy, like a morass. Autumn promised to be a season rich in deaths. More trains came through from the further end of the plain, with white faces framed in the narrow windows, trains full of condemned creatures who, this time, uttered no cries of thirst but stood motionless, clutching their despair between their hands like a twisted handkerchief. My mind was fixed on her image.

I turned to it again when new processions appeared on the road leading to the station or when, towards evening, groups of soldiers made their way into the forest with more speed than usual. Three or four times a day, whether we were going to the graveyard or coming away from it, Maria, standing at the door of the Polish canteen, would watch me thoughtfully and smile at me. My friends nudged one another but let fall no word. From their dealings with the dead they had learnt to respect mysteries. And this was undoubtedly a mystery—my devotion to the image of this girl about whom I knew nothing to suggest that she was worthy of it surprised me more than it surprised them. I pushed back my hair from my

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forehead—it was damp from the drizzling rain—and stood upright; there were still many things to which I should have to bear witness later, many sufferings to be shared, many hopes to be nurtured, many steps to be taken which would add up to something some day. But as soon as I had reached the graveyard and was standing under the branches at the verge of the forest, where raindrops rustled, the image recurred to me again.

One morning I was sunk in this sort of reverie when Cordonat called me. He led me to the end of the last row of graves where, covered with planks and with an old tarpaulin to keep off the rainwater, the spare grave lay empty, awaiting its corpse. He had just been inspecting it and had found there, besides more subtle traces which, as an expert poacher, he had picked out, a cigarette end of unfamiliar origin. It was rolled in a scrap of paper from a child's exercise book and made of coarse unripe tobacco, presumably taken from one of the plants which, in those penurious times, the peasants used to grow outside their houses.

'It wasn't there last night,' Cordonat told me. 'For several days I'd noticed that somebody had been taking up and putting back the planks and the tarpaulin during the night. So I began to keep an eye on the grave. The other proofs are more tricky, you might not believe them. But this one! There's no possible doubt about it: a man comes to sleep in our grave at night.'

'Well, what then?' I asked.

'Well, so much the better,' he cried. 'It must be a hunted man. For once, let this graveyard be some use to a living man!' (Cordonat had never been really enthusiastic about the graveyard.) 'Only we ought to help him. This evening, for instance, we might leave him some provisions.'

I did not doubt Cordonat's charitable intentions, but I also suspected that he was anxious to secure a further proof by

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this method. We had lately been receiving a little food from France and we were able, without too great a sacrifice, to deposit in the grave for the benefit of the stranger who inhabited it a handful of sugar, a piece of chocolate or a few army biscuits deducted from our store of provisions, which were meticulously arranged and counted, dry and crumbly as rats' provender. When evening came, before leaving the graveyard we slipped a parcel between the planks and then replaced them as before. Next day the parcel had disappeared. Cordonat found at the bottom of the grave a scrap of paper on which a message of thanks was pencilled, in English. The two words had been written with a trembling hand, no doubt by the first light that filtered through the parted planks as dawn brought back panic.

That evening our gift was made up merely of a few cigarettes. I added a message: 'Who are you?' Although the answer consisted only of two initials, it was clear and it did not surprise me. It was written on a piece of packing paper: I. L. An arrow invited me to turn over the page: 'You know me Peter = (the arithmetical sign *equals*) I know you. Keep quiet, both of you, keep quiet. Thank you.' I had recognized Lebovitch. But how could he know that it was I who had put the cigarettes there and that only one other knew the secret?

'During the day he must stay hidden inside the verge of the forest and watch us,' said Cordonat.

It would have been madly imprudent, and the Germans would have discovered him long ago; Cordonat admitted it. These communications through the trap-door of a grave, these notes with their anguished laconicity, the condition of 'semi-survival' in which Lebovitch existed and the second-sight with which he seemed to be endowed, all these things concurred to give me the impression that our continual contact with death was beginning to open for us a sort of wicket-gate into its domain. I almost forgot Maria. Sometimes, in the

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evening, she would walk a little way along the road below the graveyard just as we had slipped a few provisions into the grave and were replacing the planks, the tarpaulin and the stones that held it down with furtive care, as though we were laying snares. Cordonat rediscovered the pleasures of his poaching days. I would stand up and wave to Maria. The sentries were amused by my performance and it distracted their attention from the mysterious tasks which we were performing over the empty grave.

'How do you live?' I wrote to Lebovitch, leaving him a few sheets of blank paper. His answers grew longer but also more obscure. He lived with difficulty. During the day he remained hidden, no doubt, in the high branches of a tree, for he wrote: 'I am very high up. Do not look for me. A glance might betray me. I see them come to and fro. Please tell me what is happening about the dogs' (these last words were underlined). 'How soon will autumn be here? Have I the right to try and escape from God's will? Anyhow all this is unendurable and I shall not hold out much longer! If only they would let me speak! I should be exempted. Yes, they should let me speak! Have you heard tell in the village of anyone being exempted? Keep quiet! Thank you.'

During the days that followed I had difficulty in preventing Cordonat from staring up at the tree-tops on the forest border; he would have attracted the guards' attention. Instinctively, as one accustomed to roaming the woods and starting animals from their lair, he found it an exciting game to hunt for Lebovitch's aerial shelter. One morning I surprised him sitting down with his back turned to the forest and staring into a pocket mirror concealed in his hand which he was slowly turning in all directions.

'I tell you he's not found a perch in any of these trees,' he told me, putting back his little mirror into his pocket. 'Even if he'd been well camouflaged I'd have discovered him.'

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There's no foliage thick enough to conceal a man. He'd have been obliged to surround himself with other branches, cut off from other parts of the tree, and believe me, I know from experience that the colour of leaves changes as soon as they're cut. Ask him about it, once and for all. . . .'

I wrote a note to Lebovitch to this effect, accompanying it with a handful of army biscuits.

'I can't tell you where I am,' replied Lebovitch. 'You haven't told me anything about the dogs. And the exemptions? Do they ever exempt anybody? Yesterday three more trains went past. During the night there were luminous things drawn on the carriages! You can have no idea of it.' (The last words were underlined.) 'This morning I vomited because of all the raw mushrooms I'd eaten. God rises early just now. So does the wind! Couldn't they have pity on me? Tell me if it's humanly possible?'

'We shan't learn anything more,' said Cordonat when I had read him this letter.

The incoherence of these notes depressed him. We were too close to the world beyond death not to be aware of its dank breath when speech became so sparing and sibylline, when a human being's presence proved so elusive, while these brief messages expressed a tortured silence pierced by a thousand exclamation marks, like nails. We continued to offer food to this Egyptian tomb, which a couple of days later had to remove further off; death provided Lebovitch with a new neighbour.

Cordonat offered to dig the spare grave into which, that same evening, Lebovitch would creep to rest, and at the bottom of the grave he arranged a little pile of earth for the sleeper to lay his head on. I helped him in this task which, as we soon admitted to one another, filled us with a strange uneasiness; we had the feeling that we were preparing to bury an unseen friend. The present that we left in the grave that evening was



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more generous than usual. I avoided putting any message with it, however. The tone of the answers distressed me.

Lebovitch only broke silence on the second morning (he must have written his notes during the day, up in his tree or inside some unknown retreat). He had been deeply touched by Cordonat's thoughtfulness in providing the earthen pillow. Perhaps, also, by the nearness of a newly-dead Frenchman, whose burial he must have watched, since he never took his eyes off the graveyard. He wrote: 'I know that one day there will be no more morning. Last night I went on knocking for an hour against the earth, on the side where all the others are lying. I say an hour, but my watch has stopped. I wanted to go on knocking all night. As long as I'm knocking I'm alive. Even here, where I am now, at this moment, I'm knocking. And I keep saying: have mercy, have mercy! They've killed them all, Peter, killed them all! What is loneliness?'

I could no longer keep up this dialogue, and I could hardly bear the abstract presence that now filled my narrow universe. I could no longer look with confidence at the forest trees or into the hollow grave, nor gaze out over the plain where one of those trains was always dawdling. Like those tireless birds that drop to the ground like stones and as soon as they have touched it dart back to perch on one of a hundred quivering branches, then dizzily gravitate to the ground once more and once more rebound upward, as though in avid quest not of earthly or aerial prey but of pure trajectories, of secretly deliberate flights, of prophetic tangents, or as though irrevocably doomed to this endless to-and-fro, Lebovitch moved between the grave and the tree-tops every day; he was only fit for shooting down.

Yet I would have liked to save him. His talk of exemptions, although I had at first put it down to insanity (and I was beginning to find out how rich and full was insanity's account

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compared with the meagre bankbooks of reason), had made an impression on my mind. I felt I must sound the Germans, or Maria, who doubtless knew what was happening in the village now.

The Germans told me that the fate of the Jews of Brodno (and elsewhere too) was old history now. 'Let's talk of Maria instead,' they said to me. 'You're keen on her, aren't you, you rascal?'

I endured their mockery. As it happened I was anxious to speak to Maria. If she passed along the road tomorrow, might I not beckon to her to come? I'd only want a couple of minutes with her. I felt infinitely sorry for myself. Evening with its swift black clouds was falling over Volynia and its crowd of dead, over the distant fires of war, and I was standing there, eager to strike my pitiful bargain—two minutes of that time!—I was standing there with Lebovitch at my back, weighing me down, his hard hands against my shoulders. The Germans made fun of my anxiety. 'Maybe,' they said, sending me back to my graves. I slipped a note into the pit: 'In two days I'll know for sure about the exemptions.'

Next evening Maria appeared on the road with her friend. 'You can call her,' cried the sentries, laughing. I called her. She saw me. I beckoned to her to meet me at the graveyard gate. But she shook her head with a smile. She walked away. I had turned white with vexation to which, in the depths of my heart, I gave a bitter name. On the new message that I found in the grave Lebovitch wrote: 'I'm knocking harder than ever, Peter. It's the only thing to do: knock, knock, knock!' He said nothing more about exemptions.

A few trains full of condemned victims still passed through the plain. When the sound of them had faded away I still seemed to hear behind me the dull persistent rhythm of blows hammered against the earth, against a tree-trunk, mingled with the throbbing of my temples, the tapping of summer's

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last woodpecker, a far-off woodcutter's blows and the rumble of a passing cart, in a soothing confusion.

### XI

Summer drew to a close. In the darkened countryside all life was slowed down; even the great convoys of death became more infrequent—those harvests too had been gathered in. But the dawn of a new season was less like the morning after a bad dream or the lucid astonishment of life than the final draining away of all blood, the last stage of a slow hæmorrhage behind which a few tears of lymph trickle, like mourners at life's funeral. Autumn brought a prospect of exhausted silence, of a world pruned of living sounds, of the reign of total death. What had I left to delay this consummation, when every gust of wind in the branches of the trees, every leaf blown away, every corner of the naked sky, reminded me of its imminence?

It was from that moment that the life of Lebovitch, his dwindled, precarious existence, became for me the last remaining symbol of a denial of death—of that death which was so visibly being consummated all around me. I renewed our dialogue. I sent him urgent messages: 'Where were the rest? What had happened to him? and indeed, who was he?' I urged him to tell me about his own past and that of all the others.

For nothing makes you feel so impoverished as the death of strangers; dying, they testify to death, without yielding anything of their lives that might compensate for the enhanced importance of darkness. Thus what did he know of Lidia's fate? He must tell me; the survival of all my hopes depended on it.

These questions remained unanswered. Lidia sank in her turn, with all the others, like them consecrated to death, behind those distant horizons of memory, where, even after we

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have forgotten everything, there lingers a pale light, an endless comforting twilight, a thin streak of radiance which will perhaps serve us for eyes when our eyes are closed in death. Lebovitch soon caught up with Lidia on that dark slope where never, not in all eternity, should I be able to reach them.

One morning on arriving at the graveyard we found that the planks covering the empty grave had been thrown to one side. At the bottom of the grave there lay a black jacket without an armlet. One of its pockets was full of acorns. I knew then that Lebovitch would never come back. Had he been surprised in his sleep or, in a fit of madness, had he suddenly rushed out into the forest to meet his murderers? I raised my head. Clouds were rising towards the west. The wind had got up. My companions were taking away the dead leaves that fell on the graves. In the flowerbeds the summer flowers had turned black. Soon no more convoys passed along the railway over the plain, which in the mornings was drowned in mist. There were no more soldiers to be seen patrolling the woods, where the trees were growing bare. Autumn was really there now.

Maria chose this time to visit the burial-ground. I had been waiting for her there for a long time, secretly convinced that she would come. One evening she came along the ill-paved road, her thin summer dress clinging to her in the wind. She walked slowly, her face uplifted, quietly resolute, and her fair hair was fluttering over her brow. A violent fit of trembling possessed me. I turned towards the single sentry who now guarded us. He was a prematurely old man, full of melancholy resignation. He knew about my romance, and nodded his head.

I darted towards Maria like a dog let off the leash. Seeing me come, she hurried forward without taking her eyes off me and, passing the gate of the graveyard, quickly made for

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the verge of the forest. The sky had grown dark and the wind was blowing stronger. I only caught up with her under the trees. I seized hold of her arm, and she drew me on involuntarily while I spoke to her in breathless tones. I did not know what I was saying; I was in a sort of ecstasy. Suddenly I drew her to me and pressed her closely. My face groped feverishly for the hollow of her shoulder. For so long I had been waiting for this moment of blindness, of oblivion, this ultimate salvation! It was the only refuge within which to break the heavy, clipped wings that thought had set growing on one's temples, the only place where the mind, like a heavy-furred moth dazzled by the great light of death, could for an instant assuage its longing to return to the warm, original darkness of its chrysalis. . . . Frightened by the desperate wildness of my movement, Maria sharply withdrew from my arms, kissed me on the lips and fled. For a moment I tried to follow her. Then I leaned against a tree. Within me and about me a great silence had fallen. After a moment I wiped away my tears and went back to my dead.